

American Black Theology and the Development of Indigenous Theologies in India*

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During the recent civil rights and black power revolution in America, persons world-wide became aware not only of the concern of black Americans to win their political freedom but also of the religious grounding of the freedom movement. The thirteen year struggle of Martin Luther King, Jr. was supported by a Christian faith rooted in the American Social Gospel tradition of liberalism and stressing the motifs of love, justice, non-violence, and inclusive community. King's movement also relied upon the peculiar piety of the black American religious community, especially its worship setting of sermon, songs, and prayers. Just as King's Civil Rights Revolution did not bear the label black even though it was chiefly oriented to improving the status and dignity of black persons in America, so too did his theology not bear an ethnic label. His theology was an attempt to proclaim and implement a Christian Faith understood as universal and embracing all sorts and conditions of persons regardless of their race, class, or national origin. His crusade was to save the soul of America by transforming both blacks and whites. One of the most serious defects of most thought about Afro-American theologizing today is its failure to consider seriously King's theology and that of his many predecessors among black American religious thinkers.

The chief reason for that error is the change in mood and orientation of the freedom struggle by black Americans and consequently the change in the nature of doing theology and the labelling of theology. King's long campaign to achieve "the full manhood rights" of the Afro-American brought, in relation to its original goals, almost complete success. It also engendered many frustrations resulting from the advent of a white backlash and unfulfilled Negro Americans' expectations. By 1966 both these sets of events conspired to produce a vocal and influential cadre of supporters of a more radical protest movement. Brutal white violence, less than vigorous enforcement of the new civil rights laws plus riots or rebellions by black youth in Northern cities led many to question King's philosophy of love and non-violent direct action.

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The crisis and change in perspective occurred in the summer of 1966 when James Meredith, a maverick and idiosyncratic civil rights leader, was shot while marching alone through Mississippi. After the shooting, the major civil rights leaders decided to continue Meredith's Freedom March through Mississippi. In the process of this undertaking, the smouldering discontent with Martin Luther King's non-violent strategy broke into view and was greatly exploited by the media. In Greenwood, Mississippi, Stokely Carmichael told a large audience what the Negro needed was black power. Suddenly a person was on the platform calling with gusto, "What do you want?" and the crowd was roaring back, "Black Power." The Black Power slogan had entered the civil rights revolution and was to transform that movement into the black revolution. The change had repercussions also for the development of religious thought among some important segments of the Afro-American community.¹

It is fruitless to speculate about what would have happened if King had not been assassinated. What we do know is that the discontent which produced the dramatic event in Greenwood led some militant black youth, The Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee, and some activist clergy to oppose King and endorse the black power orientation. In July of 1966 a group of distinguished black clergy gave their endorsement to black power in a full page advertisement in the New York Times. Their desire was to give support to black militant youth and to counter the criticism of black power by King and some white persons. Had King lived he may have been able to moderate matters even in the face of the legitimization of black power by some clergy and black youth. His untimely death quickened the trend in favour of black power and, together with the increase of riots, rebellion and white resistance, weakened the persuasive force of some of his fundamental convictions. The slogan black power stuck and exerted considerable influence upon the substance as well as the form of Afro-American life.

A consequence of the entrance of black power into the Negro-American community was a split of the freedom movement into two rival factions, one black power and the other black awareness or black consciousness. In both factions an increased emphasis upon ethnic identity prevailed, but in the black power faction there was an intense drive to create an all-encompassing ideology defining a community of true believers within the context of the racially black community. The continuing legacy of this division is the creation of an Afro-American community which shed its old designation of coloured and Negro and adopted a new one of Afro-American or black American. The change in name tends to convey the impression that an entirely new community has come into being or that the substance of black power is dominant. That is, however, far from the case. The Negro mood still lives and is the dominant mood in the Afro-American community. Since, however, the terms Negro and coloured are

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row Publishers, 1967, pp. 23-66.

under constant attack and exist in the context of a heightened ethnic orientation and competition in America, the community has accepted the terms black awareness or black consciousness as the designation embodying continuity with its total past.

Few Afro-Americans think in colour-blind terms even though the majority sentiment is for an America which is impartial in respect to race and inclusive in respect to participation in government, business and society. As implied in the division of the freedom movement and the term itself, black power came to suggest separatism. Black awareness or black consciousness gave greater priority to continuing efforts of reconciliation between Afro-Americans and the larger American community. Black power signified the rejection of Martin Luther King's vision of black and white together. Whites were almost universally condemned as racist, expelled from the movement, or retained as sycophant providers of "no strings attached" material resources for black militants. The primary task of white persons was to return to the white community. Black power advocates separated themselves from whites and the moderate black community. They also sought to abandon King's philosophy of love, direct non-violent action, and inclusive community. They sought to build a black nation "by whatever means necessary."

"By whatever means necessary" was among black power advocates a euphemism for their willingness to use violence if necessary to obtain their ends. In fact they used little violence in spite of the increase in riots and so-called rebellions. What motivated them more than anything else was the new self-assertiveness that accompanied their surrender of the rigorous self-discipline and high moral demands of love and non-violence. They were now free from being controlled by white racist bigots or the benign white liberals who had come to occupy significant places of leadership in inter-racial activities. They were free now to be like white folk, to seek self-interest and power; not simply the power to participate but the power to dominate, to be completely autonomous, to say "hell no, I won't go." The new posture resulted in great excesses, provided a real catharsis, and supplied little addition in the way of political or economic power—the stated main goals of the militants and the radicals. In spite of all the criticism made of Martin Luther King, Jr. by these groups, he achieved a greater measure of moral, economic, political and social power for Afro-Americans than all of them combined. The concept of black power was and remains indefinite and imprecise and in those contexts where it acquired a specific meaning little real power was obtained for the masses. Possibly its most significant contribution was the increased recognition by some black Americans that they could not ultimately rely upon white persons for their freedom, no matter how sensitive their conscience or tender their heart.

This development of a new mood in the Afro-American community is crucial for understanding what is meant or should be meant by black theology. In popular conversation the term is used to apply

to all theology written by Afro-Americans. In this usage the term is employed accurately only if one is aware of the fact that this designation includes a black awareness or black consciousness perspective which seeks to carry forward a wholistic approach to Afro-American religious experience, as well as a black power perspective that seeks to radicalize the black American churches and persons by a reinterpretation of their past that is claimed to be more effective for social and political protest.

In practice such a classification scheme is hard to keep alive because the term, black theology, usually describes only the theology of James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Black theology is a school theology promoted by a small and influential group of Afro-American religious thinkers and activists. It may be the most relevant Afro-American theology but it is not the theology of most Afro-Americans whether they be found in the pew, the pulpit, or the classroom. It is the theology shaped by the reflection and peregrination of James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Its origin is to be found in their attempt to be supportive of militant black youth and community persons who protested Martin Luther King's philosophy and who sought a more radical revolution on the part of Afro-Americans. The motivation was not anti-King but pro-youth and pro-community, because in their opinion King's leadership had placed upon the black community a burden too great to be borne and one not shared by white allies or foes. It was an explicit attempt to make Christianity appealing to those believed to be the most progressive and militant members of the Afro-American community and to create within Afro-American religion a more vigorous social conscience and a more radical social praxis.

Properly understood J. Deotis Roberts, Major J. Jones, Joseph R. Washington, Jr. and most other black theologians are not writers of black theology, but rather writers of black awareness or black consciousness theology. Although their works are critical of King, they are in the spirit of King and seek to be in continuity with a wholistic perspective on Afro-American religion. The popularity of ethnicity in the United States of America makes it difficult for many publicly visible Afro-Americans to reject unequivocally the notion of black theology but for those interested in the distinction between the thought of individuals and schools of interpretation, black theology is too general a classification category and is without much meaning if used to apply to all Afro-Americans engaged in theological thought and interpretation. Black theology takes on meaning when it is seen as a conscious attempt by Cone and Wilmore and their followers to sanction black power and radical thought and action within the black American community.²

² For a statement concerning the origin and aims of black theology see Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, *Black Theology, A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979, especially pp. 1-22, 67-79.

In this brief essay I cannot give a full summary of either black theology or the theologies of black awareness or black consciousness. The writings of Cone, Wilmore, Cleage, Roberts *et al.* are too numerous. In my view the characteristic feature of black theology is its attempt to separate the religion and theology of Afro-Americans from that of the predominantly white Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies of the United States. In doing this it declared God and Jesus Christ to be not only on the side of black Americans in their freedom quest but to be black. In addition the theology asserted that any doctrine of God, man, Jesus Christ and Scripture which contradicted black demands for freedom was unchristian and any doctrine compatible with or enhancing of the drive for black freedom is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

From the beginning it also stressed God and Jesus Christ being on the side of the oppressed. It has been on the basis of this genuinely biblical motif, not its racial chauvinism, that the theology has made progress in liberating itself from its racial heresies, distortion of the nature of God, the concept of justice, and the Christian faith in order to prop up black self-assertion and social action. The dialectic in the theology swings erratically between a stress on God's liberation activity on behalf of the poor and the oppressed and an exclusive identification of both God and the oppressed with the historical activities of one segment of the Afro-American community. At times the action of the Community is not only equated with the will of God, it becomes the criterion by which one identifies God's will. The excesses are most prominent in Cone's first two volumes, *Black Theology and Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*.³ *God of the Oppressed* is a more measured volume and moves from a simplistic identification of God and the radical black community to a beginning criticism of that community, including black power and black radicals, in the light of the freedom and transcendence of God.⁴

Black theology was born as a response to important events in the Afro-American community during the period of 1964-1970. The movement away from its preoccupation with blackness is due to the community's return to a more King-like understanding of itself in spite of the common usage of the term black as the characterizing word for the community, and to the inherent inability to develop a radical black theology as a consistently Christian theology. In the early 1970's the black radical protest movement came to an end because of the unjust and illegal activities of President Nixon, J. Edgar Hoover and the Federal Bureau of Investigation as well as the nation's involvement in Vietnam and a lack of support from the Afro-American community. The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, The Black Panthers, The Deacons For Defense, The Northern Student Movement and Core all died or became paper organizations.

³ Preston N. Williams, "James Cone and the Problem of a Black Ethic," *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 65 (October, 1972), pp. 483-94.

⁴ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, New York, N.Y.: A Crossroad Book, The Seabury Press, 1975, pp. 81-85, 133-37, 185-88.

The leaders that dominated the media—Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Seale, Stokely Carmichael, Rapp Brown, Huey Newton and Angela Davis—are no longer significant radical leaders.

In short, black theology lost its constituency. In each succeeding article or address one watches Wilmore and Cone move from blackness to a more universal perspective on oppression and liberation. The present coalition is with liberation theologians in North America, Latin America, Africa and Asia. There is also a more positive significance assigned to the variable of class and sex.⁵ Black theology is on its way to becoming a political theology seeking to relate Afro-Americans to the need for the liberation of persons from the evils of racial, sexual and class oppression. Because the movement in Black Theology is away from its preoccupation with blackness and its definition of God as black, I am inclined to say that black theology too has died and has become a theology of black awareness or black consciousness. Cone and Wilmore remain the two best-known and influential persons writing theology for the Afro-American community and since they are the persons who created the black theology school of Afro-American theology, the term will be with us for some time, but the substance has departed. What remains is a liberation theology coalition which is conscious and aware of its black elements.

The death or transformation of black theology should not be interpreted as failure of the mission undertaken by that theology. Militant black youth during the time of their boldest ventures were supported by some religious spokespersons. Religious leaders did participate actively in the Afro-American community's redefinition of itself. Some Negro Americans were persuaded to see black as beautiful. Afro-American religion was pressured to take political, economic and social change more seriously. In spite of its tendency to distort the nature of Afro-American religious experience, the Christian faith, and the concept of justice, black theology made many aware of the need to correct the understanding and practice of religion and justice. In its new garb of a coalition liberation theology it can continue that task. In this form it will be taking another step towards its original intent; the creation of a more radical Christian protest movement among Afro-Americans.

My comment about black theology and its contribution to Afro-American religion and protest has been brief. Much has not been said that needs to be said. The story itself is not yet ended and future events may make present judgements less accurate. My present understanding of the doing of theology among Afro-Americans shall serve as a basis for what I shall now say about "What Indians can learn from blacks in respect of the task of creating an Indian theology."

Before setting forth my suggestions for the construction of an indigenous Indian theology I must record one disclaimer. I know myself to be unable to instruct Indians about the writing of an indi-

⁵ Wilmore/Cone, *Black Theology*, pp. 9-11, 445-462, 602-8.

genous theology. I undertake this task because I have been requested to do it and not because I feel myself qualified to instruct Indians. I interpret my assignment to be one of communication to Indian Christians, for their consideration and evaluation, what I believe to be most worthwhile about the constructive theology written by Afro-Americans during the last twenty-five years, 1956-1981.

The first thing one must learn is that indigenous theology must be the response of Indians to real and crucial community needs as perceived by an important segment of the Indian community. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cone/Wilmore articulated theologies felt to be responsive to expressed needs of the Afro-American community. An indigenous Indian theology will come when some Indian Christians feel an imperative need for it in order to support the mission of the Faith and the task of the Church. The enterprise will not be wholly new. What may be new is its pragmatic nature and systematic character. In respect to Afro-American religion, I sought to indicate that an indigenous theology was present among Afro-Americans prior to the advent of black theology and that black theology represented only one school among contemporary theological writing.

So also among Indians there is the need to recognize the existent elements of an indigenous theology and the constructive theologizing done previously and presently by Indians. One need not begin *de novo* but by recognizing and appropriating what has been done already. In reading the Cone corpus, one discovers that it is in his later works that there is explicit citing of Afro-American religious experience and thought. One can avoid this lag if one begins with a knowledge of Indian religious experience and thought rather than seeks to acquire it as one goes along. I have implied that the theology should be done by an Indian because an Indian will best know and understand the peculiarly Indian expressions of the needs, the religious experience and the thought forms. That will not always be true but it is a good assumption with which to begin and an important way of continuing the process of decolonization and the abolition of paternalism.

A second lesson to remember is that the theology need not be utterly unique, shared by no one outside the Indian community, and incapable of being judged by an outsider. Two reasons may be used to support this suggestion. The attempt at black esoteric theology failed and Cone/Wilmore now find themselves saying only an international liberation theology will succeed. Secondly, the situation in India differs radically from that of the Afro-American and one of its great needs is cross-cultural understanding and harmony. The failure of black theology in America was due to the fact that it was inherently unchristian and thus unable to sustain itself as Christian theology. One can, of course, say the same thing about some so-called white theologies and much else in culture and society that lasted for a long period of time. What is crucial is that Cone/Wilmore recognized the failure and moved like politicians to co-opt a more central position. They did this I suppose, because

above all else they wanted a Christian theology recognizable by churchpersons, not alone militants, and oriented toward motivating Afro-Americans to political and economic action. Indian Christians need not repeat their experience. They can begin by forswearing the utterly unique and recognizing that an indigenous theology must be both particular and universal.

Another factor that argues for the inclusive rather than the exclusive approach to indigenous theology is the radical pluralism and compartmentalization of Indian society. The bonds holding Afro-Americans together as one community are quite visible and effective. Some of these are an African ancestry, a known and certain history which is brief and almost wholly associated with contemporary American history, a common language, religion, and culture, the experience of slavery, emancipation, and racial discrimination, and the possession of a set of easily identifiable external characteristics. Moreover one word, black, could symbolize all of these similarities of person and community.

In India the matter of community is more complex and the bonds of cohesion less strong. Attempts at pure and complete indigenization must pertain to all that is present on the Indian sub-continent and not be simply another way of avoiding the process of integration. It must not then seek to save the particulars of every group or subgroup but rather select from all these groups those elements most helpful for answering the perennial and presently vexing problems of the human, personal, social, economic and political condition. Precisely because this selection process is one involving many groups, it must not seek to be utterly unique but must set out to be cross-cultural and to involve the participation of many groups. This entails, also, the recognition that what is decided upon can be objectively judged by others, that there is no privileged position for any person or group as a consequence of their birth or social location.

Another aspect of indigenous theology is its relationship to the West and western Christianity. One might ask, is indigenous Indian theology to preserve a uniqueness over against western Christianity, share theological motifs and understanding with the West, or permit the West to participate in judging and criticizing its theological formulations? What I have said thus far about these matters may, by some, be seen as being present in the doing of black theology. Black theology included the insights of ethnic groups in Africa, the Caribbean, the United States. All shared in the process and no persons or groups had a privileged position. The persons and groups excluded were the persons and groups of the white West, missionaries, colonizers and all other sorts of oppressors. Indian indigenous theology can, then, be open to all on the Indian sub-continent but over against the white West and its theologies assert its uniqueness and exclusiveness.

My reply to such a comment would be, yes, you can see black theology in that way, but if you do you need to ask whether the commonness of the African past, racial characteristics, and the diaspora are to be found among the Indian communities and whether they

perform the same function if present. I think the Indian case is different and requires the process I outlined irrespective of our conclusion about its similarity or dissimilarity with the Afro-American situation and the doing of black theology. I would want also to advocate sharing and openness with the white West as being permissible if the Indians wished to do it. I would recommend it because I think black theology's programme of exclusiveness failed and because I feel exclusive processes to be unchristian.

The Indian community can certainly undertake such a process without fear because the cultural and other differences on the Indian sub-continent are more perdurant than its differences with the West. If these differences can be overcome by an indigenous theology, Indian theology will face no great difficulty in its encounter with western theologies. Moreover India has a history of Christianity dating from the first century that ought to be of great value in relating indigenous religions to Christianity and in the defining of authentic Christianity. The major problem with the West will be the problem of power, not theological construction. In this essay I must assume the ability of the Indian religious community to assert its own autonomy no matter what constraints may be employed against it by western religious institutions. Given our common humanity and Christian Faith, it strikes me that uniqueness is not necessarily the consequence of being faithful or true to the peculiarities of oneself or one's community and that knowing the truth about oneself and one's communities would be enhanced by sharing with and receiving the criticism of all others.

The third lesson to be drawn from the construction of black theology is the need to be faithful to the truths of Scripture, Christian tradition and Christian theology. Every theology announces this as an aspect of its programme and to a degree achieves the goal. In addition black theology flaunted its desire in fact to violate intentionally these canons whenever they conflicted with the aspirations of some blacks for their community. This was done deliberately in order to win a constituency and demonstrate a loyalty to the black American community. This practice did not serve well the Christian or black American community, because it distorted the truths of Scripture, the Christian tradition and theology, and provided black Americans with a mistaken conception of God's will for them as a people. In the enterprise of writing an Indian indigenous theology, I would seek to avoid these intentional and deliberate errors of the black theologians. I wish to comment on three instances of error. The most serious instances had to do with the manner in which the transcendent, universal, just God was identified with a particular aspect of a people's history, the manner in which the people's history was refashioned in order to support a particular cause advocated by the theologian and the type of theological model that was given to the Afro-American people.

As I stated earlier black theology arose in an unusually tense period during a racial revolution in America. Polarization was in-

creasing between white and black and between black militants and other black Americans. The black theologians deliberately decided to support the black militants and did so in a manner that suggested that God was unequivocally on their side and any black or white that opposed them was rejecting God's will. Over time there has been some pulling back from this extreme statement but no clear rejection of it. I am troubled by this because a number of Afro-Americans believed what was said and have not heard the carefully nuanced modifications. Their legacy from black theology is a distorted conception of God and a false set of criteria for judging God's will.

The issue is not that of God being supportive of the poor, the oppressed and the blacks, or of God and persons choosing sides, or theologians risking error. The issue is whether one is taught that the first concern of theology is seeking to know and understand the ways of God and their implications for persons and societies or whether the first task of theology is advocacy for some particular interest group or programme. Black theology has not only obscured this issue, but it has built a theological programme on deception in respect to it. Having done this, it is not sufficient to excuse oneself on the ground that overstatement is the black style, that it was needed to correct an even worse error, or that it was necessary in order to teach the Afro-American community how to stand up for its rights. At some point one needs to state clearly that theology has to do with the truth about God and that means judgement concerning one's self and one's causes.

Hopefully an indigenous Indian theology will not feel it necessary to repeat the error of black theology. Taking sides is necessary in a conflict and must be done. Accepting the risk of being wrong when one decides what is truth or right is a risk one must and ought to take. My complaint is with an approach to knowing and understanding God, and to doing theology, that places victory in some historical conflict above the search for truth and faithfulness to God. Certainly an indigenous Indian theology needs to see reality from the perspective of Indians, but at the same time it must seek to imagine what is required of and due to the other. It must teach its adherents to love the neighbour as the self and it must remember that the enemy is a neighbour in need of love.

A second instance of the intentional and deliberate error of black theology was the arbitrary and distorted manner in which it read the history of the Afro-American. The theology and the people's past was shaped by a limited political focus. The only way to approach the past is by putting our questions to it, but, having done so, to listen to what it has to say and not simply to our preconceptions of its answers. Moreover every theology will be limited by its time and by the vision of those who wrote it. Nevertheless it is important to attempt to speak about the whole of God's interaction with persons and societies and not simply interpret that interaction through a particular goal which one seeks to achieve.

The latter was the approach of black theology and it has resulted in a limited and distorted representation of the history and religion of the Afro-American. Oppression is a valid biblical motif and it does relate to the entire history of people of African ancestry in America. Still one can ask if the metaphor is adequate to express the whole story of the Faith and the people. I think not. As a consequence black theology needs to see itself as only a partial theology, a protest and political theology, requiring additional theological dimensions in order to become a comprehensive theological perspective for Afro-Americans. It should speak of itself always as a Black Political Theology and not Black Theology for the term "black" like that of indigenous points in the direction of a cultural whole and not a part. Those who seek to construct an indigenous Indian theology should not repeat the intentional error of black Americans and present a partial view as the whole. They should seek rather to articulate a theology comprehending the totality of God's interaction with the people and societies of India. Certainly that is the theme found in the Scriptures. The story of the Exodus is a part and not the whole of God's relationship to Israel and of Jesus as the Christ's relationship with the people of God.

The point I have made is not a trivial one and has ramifications for our understanding of God and our usage of history. In respect to God it underscores God's nature as creator, judge and redeemer of all people and not simply God's function as liberator of our people. God is seen as the Lord of the universe and one who is impartial in relation to all persons. God is no respecter of persons. God bends justice in the direction of the poor, the widows, and the orphans, but God is also compassionate and just in his dealings with all persons. In respect to history, my point suggests that we should be as concerned to learn from history and use its insights to construct a new future as we are to use history in a fundamentalist and proof text manner for validating our own conceptions of the future. The method I suggest leads to a usage of the past that constantly provides new horizons for the future. The method of black theology is one of closure around some present programme objective.

The third error deliberately chosen was the decision by black theologians to write in a political mode rather than a more comprehensive one. While it is true that the events which called forth black theology may not have left much opportunity for choice, in the decade since other initiatives could have emerged and been advocated by this school of theology. Lynn Walker, Edward P. Wimberly and Archie Smith have written volumes on pastoral theology and DeOtis Roberts has written on the black family. The books of these black religious scholars are not usually considered black theology. Black theology has come to be known as a political theology and in its movement into its new form as an international coalition type of liberation theology it continues that orientation. Some will argue that, at this juncture in world history and the history of the Afro-American community, this is what is most needed and this is one of

black theology's positive contributions. On the other hand one might suggest that the Afro-American community requires an internal as well as an external revolution and that the understanding of theology as political is not very helpful for this imperative and present need. A theology employing a domestic model rather than a political model would be more suitable for the internal revolution.

If I am right, then Indian indigenous theologians would be well advised to employ domestic as well as political metaphors in their theological models. Both are required if the full range of community needs are to be addressed. In addition we should remember that there is more than one model for political and domestic theologies. Black theology has adopted a conflict model and one might ask if that is best suited to the Indian context or whether one would be more helped by a model that stressed consensus or something else. The type of political and domestic model one chooses is very important, but the lesson I wish to stress here is the need for choosing and advocating the employment of a domestic as well as political mode for one's indigenous theology. Indigenous theology should be a fundamental theology upon which one can erect theologies addressed to the full range of communal living. It should be inclusive, embracing all the community thinks is worthy of debate, reflection, interpretation and criticism. I would include in it the data provided by the experience and insight of missionaries, travellers and strangers in the land as well as the religious histories of the people of the sub-continent. The goal of the theology would be the providing of proximate answers to present day problems and a constant array of new insights rather than one eternal truth.

I have thus far sought to look critically at black theology and suggest what lessons might be provided by it for the construction of an indigenous Indian theology. I want now to look very briefly at Afro-American religious experience and point out three truths which merit inclusion in Indian indigenous theology. I do this to demonstrate that the proper place of learning for those seeking to construct an indigenous theology is black American experience not black theology. Black theology is but one attempt to interpret that experience and give it meaning. I do this also because it is the Afro-American experience that provides the content and substance that can make liberation or freedom valuable.

The first truth that emerges from the history of this people is that God is no respecter of persons. While enslaved and classified as chattel property by white Americans, the Afro-American through Scripture, the Christian faith and tradition, and self-reflection came to know themselves as persons and a people possessed of dignity and worth and God as no respecter of persons. Afro-Americans experienced God's love and justice and came to know that God had given them freely to all individuals and persons. God is the respecter of no persons. Emancipation and the continuing increase of freedom was but one confirmation of this truth. Many on the Indian sub-

continent have had a similar experience of slavery, caste, colonization, and discrimination. Perhaps they have made the same discovery as the Afro-American. Certainly every Christian theology needs to be informed by this insight for it is the essence of the nature of God. God stands against the denial of freedom and the devaluation of persons. In God's sight all persons and groups have equal dignity and worth and must possess a similar status in all social, economic, political and cultural institutions.

A second truth that emerges from Afro-American experience is that God desires that all persons possess power, the power to be themselves, a person, and to do God's will. Even the slave came to know that individuals were empowered to be religious and moral beings and this entailed rights and duties in social living. Knowledge of one's dignity and worth was accompanied by the grant of the ability to achieve one's status as a child of God in the communities of this world. God desired and granted people power, the power to be and the power to acquire the status of full humanity in society. Power was ubiquitous and not simply political. It was the ability to accept the self and to relate to others. It was the power of knowledge and professional skill, the power to organize and to form voluntary associations of all kinds, the power to acquire and use the economic resources needed for life, and the power to participate in the determination of their destiny. The history of the Afro-American community's fight for freedom illustrates this. It also shows clearly what should be an aspect of this teaching, namely that power should always be exercised with discipline. No better example of this can be found than the example of Martin Luther King's employment of discipline in his many demonstrations and campaigns and his use of economic coercion. He and the Afro-American community sought to destroy evil but to redeem and save the evil doers. Indians must in their indigenous theologies sanction the necessity of using power in individual and corporate ways and under the discipline of justice. Without the proper possession and use of power there can be neither persons of worth and dignity nor just institutions.

A final truth from Afro-American experience that I want to recommend for incorporation into Indian indigenous theology is love. Love is as crucial in situations of conflict and violence as it is in those of consensus and peace. It is the power that is capable of overcoming hatred and enmity and it is the power that creates and sustains mutual-ity and friendship. Without it there can be no justice or community. It makes possible union and reunion among persons and groups. It tempers every action and deed with an equal concern for the enemy and the friend. Afro-Americans found it necessary in order to make their homes and communities a place of healing and nourishment in a cruel and heartless world. They employed it in their protest in order that the transformed society might become a "beloved" community. Indian indigenous theology needs it in order to make fellowship among India's many people an actuality and in order to bring justice to all its people.

I have made perhaps a modest beginning in giving you some sense of how Afro-American life and experience, religion and theology might be helpful to you as Indian Christians. Let me conclude by observing that in many ways the experience of Afro-Americans is very different from that of Indians. We are a black minority in a large powerful homogeneous white culture and society, an affluent first world people in a situation of relative deprivation, and a people with a relatively short past in a young nation. Your history is not similar in every respect to ours. Your theology, then, must in important ways be different. Yet, because we both seek to worship and serve the same Lord and to fulfil in our lives and communities the eternal truths of the gospel, there will be some essential sameness in our thinking and doing, and theologizing. It is only because of this commonness and our one humanity that I have been so bold as to respond to your invitation to provide some suggestions regarding the construction of an Indian indigenous theology.