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ON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN CHRISTIANITY

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I

Historically speaking, Christian churches throughout the world must have committed numerous sins they should repent of, and the white churches of America in particular need a thoroughgoing repentance concerning the "Negro problem" if they are to be the churches of Christ. To begin with, they were guilty of the offence not only of having sanctioned the Negro slavery as it was introduced into the British colonies in the New World but also of having tried to justify the enslavement of Africans by referring to the Holy Bible. The scripture often quoted is an episode about Ham, the father of Canaan.

> And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: and he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. (Genesis 9: 20-25)

Incidentally, "Ham" as a Hebrew word seems to have had an implication of "hot" and "Cush" and "Mizraim," the names of the two of Ham's four sons, referred to Ethiopia and Egypt respectively, and it followed that Ham was the ancestor of Africans and that Africans were providentially ordained to serve other peoples as slaves.

And furthermore, St. Paul was rather negative as to the emancipation of slaves, and white churches in the antebellum America helped to buttress the Negro slavery by taking advantage of his admonitions such as "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed" (I Timothy 6: 1) and "Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things; not answering again: not purloining, but shewing all good fidelity; that they may adore the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things" (Titus 2: 9-10). In short, the Christianity which black people came to know through the ministry of white churches in the New World was primarily the religion of white slaveholders, that is, the religion of oppressors and served as the means to justify the principle of white supremacy in the name of God.

This was a very ironical situation, indeed, because one of the most important messages of the Holy Bible is the liberation of man, exemplified by the exodus of Israelites from Egypt

in the Old Testament and by the doctrine of salvation in the New Testament. And if Ethiopia can stand for the whole Africa, the salvation of Africans was predestinated in the providence of God, as the Psalmist proclaimed in Psalm 68: 31—"Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God." In fact, it is easy to find several references to Egypt or Ethiopia in the Holy Bible. What we recall first of all is the well-known story of Joseph and his brothers, and we know that Solomon, the son of David, "made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter, and brought her into the city of David." (I Kings 3: 1) And later on when the kingdom of Judah sought help from Egypt to be delivered from the king of Assyria, Isaiah the prophet criticized it and at the same time prophesied about Egypt, saying:

> In that day shall there be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar at the border thereof to the Lord. And it shall be for a sign and for a witness unto the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt: for they shall cry unto the Lord because of the oppressors, and he shall send them a saviour, and a great one, and he shall deliver them. And the Lord shall be known to Egypt, and the Egyptians shall know the Lord in that day, and shall do sacrifice and oblation; yea, they shall vow a vow unto the Lord, and perform it. (Isaiah 19: 19–21)

Turning now to the New Testament, we are told that Joseph took the young Jesus and his mother and fled into Egypt for fear Herod should seek the young child to destroy him. When Herod died and Joseph took the young child and his mother back into the land of Israel, the evangelist says that it was "fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet [Hosea], saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son." (Matt. 2: 15) Next we have a tradition which says that Simon a Cyrenian who was forced to carry the cross for Jesus Christ on the way to Golgotha was a black man.[1] This tradition may have risen from the fact that he came from Cyrene, the capital of the Cyrenaica in northern Africa. If this Simon were the same person with Simeon who was among the prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch, there would be chances that this tradition had some basis in reality, because Simeon was also called Niger ["black"].[2] At any rate, it is worth remembering that one of the black people was given the honor of sharing in the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally we have a most compelling account of the conversion of an African in Acts 8: 26–40.

> And the angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, saying, Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza, which is desert. And he arose and went: and, behold, a man of Ethiopia, an eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had the charge of all her treasure, and had come to Jerusalem for worship, was returning, and sitting in his chariot read Esaias the prophet. Then the spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him. The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: in his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from

[1] *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* says that it is unlikely that Simon a Cyrenian was a Negro, and this endorses the persistence of the tradition which says that he was a Negro.

[2] *Cf.* Acts 13: 1.

the earth. And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing. But Philip was found at Azotus: and passing through he preached in all the cities, till he came to Caesarea.

It is of course impossible for us to verify the tradition which says that this eunuch became the founder of the Abyssinian [Ethiopian] Church.[3] *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says that Christianity was introduced into Ethiopia in the fourth century by St. Frumentius and Edesius of Tyre, and according to Eusebius "the Father of Church History," "Mark [the evangelist] is said to have been the first man to set out for Egypt and preach there the gospel which he had himself written down, and the first to establish churches in Alexandria itself. So large was the body of believers, men and women alike, built up there at the first attempt, with an extremely severe rule of life, that Philo decided that he must record in writing their activities, gatherings, meals, and everything else about their way of living."[4]

To be sure, the Christianity which was introduced into northern Africa developed steadily enough to produce three great Church Fathers, i.e., Tertulian, St. Cyprian, and St. Augustine of Hippo, but except for the Abyssinian [Ethiopian] Church the churches established in northern Africa were not indigenous after all, and partly because the Christendom around the fifth century was split over the bitter theological controversies on the Nature of Christ, they were helpless before the invasion of militant Moslems. As for the Copts, in 616 they "passed for a time under Persian domination. In 642 they were conquered by the Arabs, whose rule in varying form has lasted to the present day. . . . The Copts obtained real freedom of worship only with the British occupation which followed on the battle of Tel-el-Kebir (1882)."[5] Thus it was that by the time when Europeans met with Africans on the west coast of Africa in the fifteenth century, Moslems had reached there, having conquered almost all the northern part of Africa, and it is no wonder that Europeans had come to identify Africans with Moslems.

II

Now it was Portuguese who initiated the African slave trade in the fifteenth century, and Basil Davidson, a British journalist of great authority on Africa, mentions in his *Black Mother* [later re-titled *The African Slave Trade*] (1961) the first recorded encounter of Europeans and Africans south of the Sahara. According to that record, a little ship sailed from Portugal under the command of one Antam Gonçalvez in the year 1441, just half a century

[3] *Cf.* Edward W. Blyden, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887) p. 164.
[4] Eusebius, *The History of the Church* ii. 16 [Penguin Classics (1965) p. 86].
[5] *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* p. 346.

before Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic. Gonçalvez and his crew sailed as far as the southern seaboard of what is now Morocco or the Spanish colony of Rio de Oro, and then the young Gonçalvez conceived the idea of pleasing his royal master, Prince Henry of Portugal, by capturing some of the inhabitants of this unknown southern land. Gonçalvez and nine of his men went ashore, and with the help of another Portuguese venturer, Nuño Tristão by name, they captured twelve Africans in all and carried them back with them to Lisbon and presented them to the Prince.[6]

This expedition of Gonçalvez's gave rise to the African slave trade, and as cargo after cargo of Africans was brought in a small ship to Portugal from the African coast, a larger expedition of six ships was dispatched, and the whole expedition brought home two hundred and thirty-five captives. With this triumph "the oversea slave trade may really be said to have begun."[7]

But the slave trade thus started was only a part of the Portuguese trade with Africa, and as there was a limit to the demand for slaves in Portugal and Spain and no demand for them in other European countries at that time, it might have decreased in quantity and might have come to an end. As it was, the Spaniards started to plant colonies under the specious system of "encomienda" in the West Indies as soon as Columbus discovered them, and they learned to replace the natives of the West Indies with Africans as slaves, and the African slave trade with the New World which at first was a trickle became a flood in no time, carrying away no less than 50 million Africans out of Africa over the period of nearly four hundred years.[8]

Needless to say, the African slave trade was first and foremost one form of business transaction based on the simple economic principle of demand and supply, and yet it was on such a gigantic scale and caused enslaved Africans such a tremendous misery that it is not too much to say that it was one of the most heinous crimes of humanity against humanity. Furthermore, what we must remember here is that this crime was committed under the sanction of ecclesiastical authorities. When Prince Henry was presented with twelve black Moors by Gonçalvez, he was very much delighted with it and "sent a special embassy to the Pope, explaining his plans for further raid and even conquest; and the Pope, welcoming this new crusade, granted 'to all those who shall be engaged in the said war, complete forgiveness of all their sins.' "[9]

In other words, the enslavement of Africans was authorized as a holy war against them because they were regarded as Moslems, the irreconcilable enemies of Christians. This must have been particularly encouraging to the Spaniards who had been suffering under the conquest by Moslem Moors for more than seven hundred years, and it was only in this context that Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Spanish clergyman, could have put forward a proposal in 1516 [or in 1518] that Africans be introduced into the West Indies to replace Indians as slaves.

Las Casas, as is well known, was the protector of the Indians in the West Indies and tried to save them from destruction by writing *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1552). He owned African slaves as well as Indian slaves, and so he may have made

[6] *Cf.* Basil Davidson, *Black Mother* [*The African Slave Trade*] (1961) pp. 33–35.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 37.
[8] *Cf. Ibid.*, p. 80.
[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

the notorious proposal for a very practical reason. But it is easy to point out the discrepancy in his attitude toward Africans and Indians. David Brion Davis refers to this discrepancy in Las Casas and goes on to say:

> The changing policies of the Spanish and Portuguese governments revealed a similar double standard with respect to Indians and Negroes, *which derived in part from the traditional inclination to associate the Africans with Moors, and thus with a menacing infidelity.*[10] [Italics mine]

Strangely enough, Basil Davidson does not refer to Las Casas's proposal but writes about the incipient African slave trade with the West Indies as follows:

> The trade in Negro captives became important as early as 1510. Before that, there had been sporadic shipments whenever the need for labor was especially acute. Ovando, in Hispaniola, had soon been forced to change his mind about suppression of the Negro trade; already in 1505, thirteen years after Columbus made his crossing, the Spanish archives mention a caravel sailing from Seville with seventeen Negro slaves and some mining equipment. Soon Ovando was asking for many more Negro workers. And in 1510 there came the beginning of the African slave trade in its massive and special form: royal orders were given for the transport first of fifty and then of two hundred slaves for *sale* in the Indies. Throughout the years that followed it was to be the searing brand of this trade that it would consider its victims, not as servants or domestic slaves who deserved respect in spite of their servile condition, but as chattel slaves, commodities that could and should be sold at whim or will.[11]

Therefore, we cannot blame Las Casas alone for having proposed the introduction of Africans into the West Indies, but even after having retracted his proposal there is no evidence that he denounced the enslavement of Africans publicly, nor did he advocate their emancipation. On the contrary, he continued to own several African slaves as late as 1544.[12] That is why he was unsparingly condemned by one of the blacks in America.

> It is well known to the Christian world that Bartholomew Las Casas, that very notoriously avaricious Catholic priest or preacher, and adventurer with Columbus in his second voyage, proposed to his countrymen, the Spaniards in Hispaniola, to import the Africans from the Portuguese settlements in Africa, to dig up gold and silver, and work their plantations for them, to effect which, he made a voyage thence to Spain, and opened the subject to his master, Ferdinand, then in declining health, who listened to the plan; but who died soon after, and left it in the hands of his successor, Charles V.—This wretch, ("Las Casas, the Preacher"), succeeded so well in his plans of oppression, that in 1503, the first blacks had been imported into the new world. Elated with this success, and stimulated by sordid avarice only, he importuned Charles V. in 1511, to grant permission to a Flemish merchant to import 4000 blacks at one time. Thus we see, through the instrumentality of a pretended preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ our common master, our wretchedness first commenced in America—where it has been continued from 1503 to this day, 1829. A period of three hundred and twenty-six years. But two hundred and nine, from 1620 [1619]—when twenty of our fathers were brought into Jamestown, Virginia, by a Dutch man-of-war, and sold off like brutes to the highest bidders; and there is not a doubt in my mind, but that tyrants are in hopes to perpetuate our miseries under them and their children until the final consummation of all things. But if they do not get dreadfully

[10] David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1970) p. 192.
[11] Basil Davidson, *Op. Cit.*, p. 46.
[12] *Cf.* Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians* (1959) p. 9.

deceived, it will be because God has forgotten them.[13]

Be that as it may, there was no stopping the African slave trade once it was started. It expanded by leaps and bounds as sugar, tobacco and cotton were being produced in large quantities on the plantations, the former in the West Indies and the latter two on the continent of North America. And since the Iberian peoples had become accustomed to having Moslem Negro slaves, there was no concerted opposition to the establishment of Negro slavery in the West Indies at least during the sixteenth century.[14] As Eric Williams says in his *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), the origin of Negro slavery "can be expressed in three words: in the Caribbean, Sugar; on the mainland, Tobacco and Cotton. A change in the economic structure produced a corresponding change in the labor supply. . . . Sugar, tobacco, and cotton required the large plantation and hordes of cheap labor, and the small farm of the ex-indentured white servant could not possibly survive. The tobacco of the small farm in Barbados was replaced by the sugar of the large plantation. The rise of the sugar industry in the Caribbean was the signal for a gigantic dispossession of the small farmer. Barbados in 1645 had 11,200 small white farmers and 5,680 Negro slaves; in 1665 there were 745 large plantation owners and 82,023 slaves."[15]

Thus we see that the sugar, the taste of which our ancestors learned to relish at this time, was first produced by the hard labor of Negro slaves, and the sweetness of sugar must have been mixed with the bitterness of the blood and sweat of those slaves. Eric Williams goes on to say:

> Negro slavery blackened that [social] structure all over the Caribbean while the blood of the Negro slaves reddened the Atlantic and both its shores. Strange that an article like sugar, so sweet and necessary to human existence, should have occasioned such crimes and bloodshed![16]

The African slave trade initiated by the Portuguese and taken over by the Spaniards was then handed over to the British. And when the colonies in British America declared their independence, the independence and freedom they obtained did not extend to Negro slaves, nor could they stop the African slave trade then and there. In fact, the Constitution of the new republic, "the homeland of the free," stipulated in Article I, Section 9 that "The Migration or *Importation* of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such *Importation*, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person." [Italics mine] This stipulation was a kind of law in force only for a limited period of time, and it said in short that any free citizen of America was allowed to import an African slave until 1808 if he could afford to pay 10 dollars as a tax or duty for the slave. And no one can deny the possibility that African slaves were smuggled into the slave states after 1808.

During all these years the church also supported the slave trade. "The Spaniards saw in it an opportunity of coverting the heathen, and the Jesuits, Dominicans and Franciscans were heavily involved in sugar cultivation which meant slave-holding. . . . The

[13] David Walker, *Walker's Appeal* (1829) [Arno Press (1969)] pp. 47–48.
[14] Lewis Hanke, *Op. Cit.*, p. 9.
[15] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) p. 23.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Society for the Propagation of the Gospel prohibited Christian instruction to its slaves in Barbados, and branded 'Society' on its new slaves to distinguish them from those of the laity; . . . Many missionaries found it profitable to drive out Beelzebub by Beelzebub. According to the most recent English writer on the slave trade, they 'considered that the best way in which to remedy abuse of negro slaves was to set the plantation owners a good example by keeping slaves and estates themselves, accomplishing in this practical manner the salvation of the planters and the advancement of their foundations.' The Moravian missionaries in the islands held slaves without hesitation; the Baptists, one historian writes with charming delicacy, would not allow their earlier missionaries to deprecate ownership of slaves. To the very end the Bishop of Exeter retained his 655 slaves, for whom he received over £12,700 compensation in 1833. . . . Quaker nonconformity did not extend to the slave trade. In 1756 there were eighty-four Quakers listed as members of the Company trading to Africa, among them the Barclay and Baring families. Slave trading was one of the most lucrative investments of English as of American Quakers, and the name of a slaver, *The Willing Quaker*, reported from Boston at Sierra Leone in 1739, symbolizes the approval with which the slave trade was regarded in Quaker circles. The Quaker opposition to the slave trade came first and largely not from England but from America, and there from the small rural communities of the North, independent of slave labor."[17]

III

We may now find it rather surprising, but slaveholders in the colonies of British America were reluctant at first to have the Gospel preached to their slaves even though the Christianization of Negro slaves was widely held as a means of justifying Negro slavery. For one thing, they feared that they might have to emancipate their slaves when they allowed them to be baptized. Did Jesus not say, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8: 31–32)? They also feared, quite justly, that Christianity might give their slaves an idea of egalitarianism and make them untractable as slaves. And so in 1667 the Assembly of Virginia, hoping that it would alleviate the fear of slaveholders and promote the propagation of Christianity among their slaves, passed a law to the effect that Christian baptism did not confer freedom on slaves,[18] and by 1706 at least six colonial legislatures had passed acts denying that baptism altered the condition of a slave as to his bondage or freedom.[19]

But there were other considerations that impeded the evangelization of Negro slaves. Slaveholders thought that it was an economic loss to give their slaves religious instruction in preparation for their baptism, because it took time. They even thought that Africans were too unintelligent to be instructed. And what was worse, in the Southern colonies where Negro slaves were concentrated, clergy were in short supply. On the other hand, Negro slaves at first paid little attention to the preaching of the Gospel even though early in the eighteenth century the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts as well as the Moravians, the Presbyterians, the Quakers and the Catholics started a sys-

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.
[18] *Cf.* E. F. Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (1957) p. 24.
[19] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (1978) p. 99.

tematic attempt to evangelize them. We cannot, however, jump to the conclusion that black people were "a stiff-necked people."[20] As Gayraud S. Wilmore says in his *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1972),

> The slaves were uneducated, by Western standards, but they were not fools. Almost immediately they recognized the gross inconsistency between the allegation that this all-powerful God of the white man cared so much about their eternal salvation, and the fact of his indifference to the powerlessness and wretchedness of their present condition. . . . They were fully aware that the God who demanded their devotion and the spirit that infused their secret meetings and possessed their souls and bodies in the ecstacy of worship, was not the God of the slavemaster, with his whip and gun, nor the God of the plantation preacher, with his segregated services and unctuous injunction to humility and obedience.[21]

It is true that Negro slaves came to know the God of the Bible through their masters, but they chose to worship Him in their own way, and in the antebellum South what E. Franklin Frazier calls the "invisible institution" of the church took root among the enslaved blacks.[22] Whether this "invisible institution" was the genuine Christian church or not remains to be proved, but it was "a space of meaning, freedom, and transcendence"[23] where under the pretense of holding a religious meeting Negro slaves were able to flee, if only for a moment, from the slaveholders' strict surveillance, regain their lost identity as human beings, and enjoy fellowship and the sense of solidarity, and it also served once in a while as a hotbed or stronghold for slave revolts. That is why "as early as 1715, North Carolina passed an act declaring that any master or slaveowner who permitted 'Negroes to build . . . any house under the pretense of a meeting-house upon account of worship, shall be liable to a fine of fifty pounds.' In 1723, Maryland voted to restrict independent meetings among Negroes, and by 1700, Georgia had forbidden slave assemblies under the penalty of 'twenty-five stripes, with a whip, switch or cowskin.' "[24]

With the "Great Awakening" sweeping over the colonies in the middle of the eighteenth century, large numbers of Negro slaves were attracted to the proselyting activities of the Methodists and Baptists. It was because the Methodists and Baptists stressed on the immediate religious experiences such as repentance, the remission of sins, and regeneration rather than the knowledge of the doctrines of Christianity, and the "immersion" the Baptists insisted on as a form of baptism seems to have had a special appeal to Negro slaves. Moreover, the Baptists traditionally emphasized the independence of a local church and occasionally ordained laymen as preachers, and so there appeared not a few Negro lay preachers who preached even to white congregations while staying in their place as slaves.

All in all, what struck Negro slaves most when they were exposed to the Holy Bible was the Exodus, that is, the magnificent drama in which the Lord called Moses to liberate the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt. They saw a close parallel between their condition as slaves and that of the Israelites in Egypt and read the drama of their own bondage and freedom into the Exodus and turned to the God of the Bible for their deliverance. This is amply attested by many Negro Spirituals—specifically by "Go Down, Moses," one of

[20] *Cf.* Exodus 33: 3.
[21] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1972) p. 14.
[22] *Cf.* E. F. Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (1964) p. 16.
[23] Albert J. Raboteau, *Op. Cit.*, p. 318.
[24] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Op. Cit.*, p. 36.

the most famous, and this means that Negro slaves learned to use as a means of resistance the Christianity that had been forced upon them by their masters. It is, therefore, not for nothing that the leaders of slaves revolts, such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner were, without exception, well versed in the Holy Bible.

These leaders of slave revolts perused the Bible and came to have a kind of megalomaniacal idea that they were the vessels set aside by God for the cause of liberating their fellow slaves from the yoke of slavery. According to the "Confession" he made before his execution (1831), Nat Turner, when three or four years old, showed his supernatural ability by relating things that had happened before he was born, and came to have a belief that he was intended for some great purpose. He learned to read and write with the most perfect ease, and when he was grown up, he was struck with that scripture commented on at meetings which says, "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you." (Matt. 6: 33) A little later he heard the Holy Spirit say this scripture to him twice, which fully confirmed him in the impression that he "was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty." And then he had a vision in which white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams, and he also heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare [*sic*] it." Shortly afterwards, while laboring in the field, he discovered drops of bood on the corn, and he knew that the day of judgement was at hand, and on the appearance of the sign (the eclipse of the sun) he launched the work of death together with his fellow slaves.[25]

It may be possible to describe Nat Turner as a bloodthirsty fanatic, but there is no doubt that he firmly believed that it was God's will to liberate enslaved blacks from their bondage and that he was acting as the surrogate of God in wreaking His vengeance upon white foes. He says in his "Confession" that when the white people would not let him and his fellow slaves be baptized by the church, they went down into the water together, in the sight of many who reviled them, and were baptized by the Spirit,[26] and he seems to have served as "exhorter" among his fellow slaves. Therefore it would be impossible to treat of Nat Turner's slave rebellion without taking into account the Christianity as he understood it.

As most scholars are agreed, it was when Richard Allen founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 that the institutional Negro Church came into being. Richard Allen was born a slave in Philadelphia, and he early came under the influence of Methodist preachers and was converted in 1777. In the same year he purchased his freedom, and after engaging in odd jobs he became a preacher in 1780 and traveled with white ministers. In 1786 he was invited to preach in the St. George Methodist Episcopal Church and when the number of Negroes attending the church increased, they were ordered to sit in the gallery, and the next year Allen and other two Negroes, mistaking their section of the gallery, were almost dragged out of their seat while they were praying. They left the church, because Allen in particular had felt the need of a separate church for Negroes, and together with other Negro members they founded the Free African Society, which eventually led to the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia in 1816.

[25] *Cf.* Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (1968) pp. 127–151.
[26] *Ibid.*, pp. 137–138.

The institutional Negro Church thus established was nothing but another sect of the traditional Christianity which had become the religion of white men. The fact was that a limited number of free Negroes, who had been segregated in white churches, wanted to have their own churches modelled on those of white men, and therefore they failed to produce any new theology or Christology that could refute the idea of white supremacy that had been prevalent in white churches. Richard Allen, for example, apparently believed that slavery was against the will of God but still thought that "being good obedient slaves and affectionate toward the masters would promote the slave's freedom" and advised his brethren to trust God for their freedom and love their masters. In his view, if the slaves failed to get freedom here on earth, they would get it in the afterlife, and this view, as Benjamin E. Mays says, "had in it the germ to make the slave contented with his lot, thus accepting slavery until God saw fit to abolish it."[27]

The most slashing attack on the white Christianity as the bulwark of Negro slavery in the antebellum America came, naturally enough, from those blacks who identified themselves with the abolitionist movement. But it must be remembered that they were not infidels. They were, almost without exception, devout and God-fearing blacks who believed in the righteousness of God, and what they did was to point out how far removed the religion of slaveholders was from what Christianity should be and urge them to restore their faith in the Lord. David Walker, who condemned Las Casas for having proposed the introduction of Africans into the New World, says:

> Can any thing be a greater mockery of religion than the way in which it is conducted by the Americans? It appears as though they are bent only on daring God Almighty to do his best —they chain and handcuff us and our children and drive us around the country like brutes, and go into the house of the God of justice to return Him thanks for having aided him [*sic*] in their infernal cruelties inflicted upon us. Will the Lord suffer this people to go on much longer, taking his holy name in vain? Will he not stop them, PREACHERS and all? O Americans! Americans! I call God—I call angels—I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION *is at hand*, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT.[28]

And Frederick Douglass, one of the greatest leaders of black people in the nineteenth century, says in his *Narrative* (1845):

> . . . I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter, under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of salveholders find the strongest protection.[29]

IV

When the Negro slavery was abolished as the result of the Civil War, the "invisible institution" of the church which had taken root among the enslaved blacks merged into the institutional church which had grown up among the free Negroes before the Civil War. The institutional church was now able to create a fairly large ministry by commissioning

[27] *Cf.* Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God* (1938) p. 38.
[28] David Walker, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 55–56.
[29] *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) pp. 78–79.

black lay preachers to serve as ministers, and this led to the rapid growth in the size of the Negro church organization. The Negro church soon came to cover the entire Negro life, and the local Negro churches throughout America were not merely the places for worship but also became economic co-operation centers, social clubs, and facilities for education, sports and entertainment. During the Reconstruction period when emancipated blacks enjoyed civil rights to some degree, Negro preachers served as political leaders, and after the Reconstruction when black people were excluded from the political activities of the American life through the backlash of white citizens, they turned to church politics and took part in the election of their officers and representatives to conventions. Furthermore, as the discrimination against them was institutionalized in the North as well as in the South, they took refuge in the Negro church. Their church life was their solace and comfort in a hostile white world. With the urbanization of black population during and after the First World War, the Negro church played a yet larger role in re-organizing the life of black city-dwellers who had been uprooted from their traditional way of life in the rural South.

And yet it must be pointed out that what the Negro church did over these years after all was to help black people to give vent to their anger, despair, and frustration in the form of religious fervor and that it failed to transform this religious fervor into a revolutionary spirit with which to fight white racism in America. And as black people entered into new occupations in the urban environment, the Negro church had to adapt itself to the religious needs of the various occupational groups and became more secularized and less radical. As a matter of fact, "the deradicalization of the Black church, like its counterpart in the white community, was almost complete by the middle of this century. Although many perceptive observers recognized the unique role it continued to play and its freedom from some of the sins of the white church, it could nevertheless be said—with a note of disappointment and nostalgia—that 'in relations with the white community the Negro church has been for the most part a defensive and accommodating institution.' "[30]

Under these circumstances we find it all the more noteworthy that Martin Luther King, Jr., showed how Christian faith could be materialized into social action when he took the leadership in the bus boycott movement in 1950's. As is well known, he believed that Christian love would ultimately triumph over enmity and derived the strategy and tactics of his non-violent action from the Sermon on the Mount and the idea of civil disobedience advocated and practiced by Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi. Dr. King's religion was, above all, a revival of the radical tradition of the "invisible institution," and for all the detraction against him, he "projected upon the nation a new image of the Black church and a new awareness of the radical possibilities inherent in Black religion."[31]

With Dr. King leading the development generally described as the Black Power movement in 1960's, we can see that there was a close correlation between Black Power and Black Christianity, and it would be interesting to examine James Baldwin's experience in Christianity on one hand and the theological renewal in James Cone's "Black Theology" on the other hand. According to what he says in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin "underwent a prolonged religious crisis" during the summer when he became fourteen, which means that he accepted Christianity because there was no alternative, and his process of conversion

[30] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Op. Cit.*, p. 226.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 238.

was quite normal in that as an adolescent he was convinced of his guiltiness before the righteous God and asked for the remission of sins. But the Christianity he accepted was the religion both of white men and of his step-father who hated him, and he wondered why God, who was reputed to be the God of love, had forsaken the black people of America for such a long time. Recalling the night when he was "saved," he writes:

> All I really remember is the pain, the unspeakable pain; it was as though I were yelling up to Heaven and Heaven would not hear me. And if Heaven would not hear me, if love could not descend from Heaven—to wash me, to make me clean—then utter disaster was my portion. Yes, it does indeed mean something—something unspeakable—to be born, in a white country, an Anglo-Teutonic, antisexual country, black. You very soon, without knowing it, give up all hope of communion. Black people, mainly, look down or look up but do not look at each other, not at you, and white people, mainly, look away. And the universe is simply a sounding drum; there is no way, no way whatever, so it seemed then and has sometimes seemed since, to get through a life, to love your wife and children, or your friends, or your mother and father, or to be loved. The universe, which is not merely the stars and the moon and the planets, flowers, grass, and trees, but *other people*, has evolved no terms for your existence, has made no room for you, and if love will not swing wide the gates, no other power will or can. And if one despairs—as who has not?—of human love, God's love alone is left. But God—and I felt this even then, so long ago, on that tremendous floor, unwillingly—is white. And if His love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far? In spite of all I said thereafter, I found no answer on the floor—not *that* answer, anyway—and I was on the floor all night. Over me, to bring me "through," the saints sang and rejoiced and prayed. And in the morning, when they raised me, they told me that I was "saved."[32]

He was "saved," to be sure, and even long after he stopped going to church, he says, "The church was very exciting. It took a long time for me to disengage myself from this excitement, and on the blindest, most visceral level, I never really have, and never will."[33] But he still cannot help saying with anguish that God is *white*. This statement of his epitomizes one of the most important features of the black experience in Christianity.

And so what is urgently needed here is a new theology and a new interpretation of the Bible that can refute the white Christianity and the traditional white theology, and James Cone's "Black Theology" is undeniably the attempt to meet the need.

Now Black Theology is a revolutionary theology James Cone has advocated in *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and he begins by saying that "if, as I believe, Black Power is the most important development in American life in this century, there is a need to begin to analyze it from a theological perspective"[34] and goes on to say:

> It is my thesis, however, that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture the man Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not.[35]

[32] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963) pp. 44–45.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
[34] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) p. 1.
[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

In his view, Black Power and Christianity have this in common: the liberation of man! If God works through Christ to liberate man, Christianity must identify itself with the black men's struggle for freedom, and just as God became one of the oppressed Jews in Christ, Christ must needs be a black man in America.

> To suggest that Christ has taken on a black skin is not theological emotionalism. If the Church is a continuation of the Incarnation, and if the Church and Christ are where the oppressed are, then Christ and his Church must identify totally with the oppressed to the extent that they too suffer for the same reasons persons are enslaved. In America, blacks are oppressed because of their blackness. It would seem, then, that emancipation could only be realized by Christ and his Church becoming black.[36]

It may be possible to counteract Black Theology by saying that it lacks fairness and universality and that it makes a monopoly of Christ, but we might as well ask on which side Jesus Christ, who "eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners," will stand in a society where some people are oppressed and discriminated against by others for no other reason than the color of their skin. And we must never forget the undeniable fact that the "universal" Christian theology which proclaims that Jesus Christ died for all people has almost always distorted Christianity into an instrument of discrimination and oppression. Black Theology, precisely because it is advocated by one of the oppressed in America, can interpret the Gospel of Christ in its essence, and this means, above all, the deepening of the black experience in Christianity.

The next task of Black Theology would be to answer theologically why black people in particular have had to suffer the groundless oppression. To proclaim that God works through Christ and his Church to liberate black people is to prove that Christianity is not the religion of white men alone, but unless it can be said that God did not, from the beginning, intend to make the black people suffer that oppression, it cannot be proved once for all that God is *not* a white racist. This question has something in common with the eternal question as to why the unjust prosper and the just have to suffer in this world. The black experience in Christianity now needs a new theodicy.

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[36] *Ibid.*, p. 69.