

The Marxist roots of black liberation theology

BY ANTHONY B. BRADLEY, PHD • APRIL 02, 2008

Acton Institute – Commentary

<https://acton.org/pub/commentary/2008/04/02/marxist-roots-black-liberation-theology>

What is black liberation theology, anyway? Barack Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, catapulted black liberation theology onto a national stage when America discovered Trinity United Church of Christ. Understanding the background of the movement might give better clarity into Wright's recent vitriolic preaching. A clear definition of black theology was first given formulation in 1969 by the National Committee of Black Church Men in the midst of the civil rights movement:

Black theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the Gospel is commensurate with the achievements of black humanity. Black theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says "no" to the encroachment of white oppression.

In the 1960s, black churches began to focus their attention beyond helping blacks cope with national racial discrimination, particularly in urban areas.

The notion of "blackness" is not merely a reference to skin color, but rather is a symbol of oppression that can be applied to all persons of color who have a history of oppression (except whites, of course). So in this sense, as Wright notes, "Jesus was a poor black man" because he lived in oppression at the hands of "rich white people." The overall emphasis of black liberation theology is the black struggle for liberation from various forms of "white racism" and oppression.

James Cone, the chief architect of black liberation theology in his book *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), develops black theology as a system. In this new formulation, Christian theology is a theology of liberation – "a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the

Gospel, which is Jesus Christ," writes Cone. Black consciousness and the black experience of oppression orient black liberation theology – i.e., one of victimization from white oppression.

One of the tasks of black theology, says Cone, is to analyze the nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in light of the experience of oppressed blacks. For Cone, no theology is Christian theology unless it arises from oppressed communities and interprets Jesus' work as that of liberation. Christian theology is understood in terms of systemic and structural relationships between two main groups: victims (the oppressed) and victimizers (oppressors). In Cone's context, writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the great event of Christ's liberation was freeing African Americans from the centuries-old tyranny of white racism and white oppression.

American white theology, which Cone never clearly defines, is charged with having failed to help blacks in the struggle for liberation. Black theology exists, because "white religionists" failed to relate the Gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society.

For black theologians, since white Americans do not have the ability to recognize the humanity in persons of color, blacks need their own theology to affirm their identity in terms of a reality that is anti-black. "Blackness" stands for all victims of white oppression. "White theology," when formed in isolation from the black experience, becomes a theology of white oppressors, serving as divine sanction from criminal acts committed against blacks. Cone argues that even those white theologians who try to connect theology to black suffering rarely utter a word that is relevant to the black experience in America. White theology is not Christian theology at all. There is but one guiding principle of black theology: an unqualified commitment to the black community as that community seeks to define its existence in the light of God's liberating work in the world.

As such, black theology is a survival theology, because it helps blacks navigate white dominance in American culture. In Cone's view, whites consider blacks animals, outside of the realm of humanity, and attempted to destroy black identity through racial assimilation and integration programs – as if blacks have no legitimate existence apart from whiteness. Black theology is the theological expression of a people deprived of social and political power. God is not the God of white religion but the God of black existence. In Cone's understanding, truth is not objective but subjective – a personal experience of the Ultimate in the midst of degradation.

The echoes of Cone's theology bleed through the now infamous, anti-Hillary excerpt by Rev. Wright. Clinton is among the oppressing class ("rich white people") and is incapable of understanding oppression ("ain't never been called a n-gger") but Jesus knows what it was like, because he was "a poor black man" oppressed by "rich white people." While black liberation theology is not mainstream in most black churches, many pastors in Wright's generation are burdened by Cone's categories, which laid the foundation for many to embrace Marxism and a distorted self-image of the perpetual "victim."

Black Liberation Theology as Marxist Victimology

Black liberation theology actually encourages a victim mentality among blacks. John McWhorters' book *Losing the Race*, will be helpful here. Victimology, says McWhorter, is the adoption of victimhood as the core of one's identity – for example, like one who suffers through living in "a country and who lived in a culture controlled by rich white people." It is a subconscious, culturally inherited affirmation that life for blacks in America has been in the past and will be in the future a life of being victimized by the oppression of whites. In today's terms, it is the conviction that, 40 years after the Civil Rights Act, conditions for blacks have not substantially changed. As Wright intimates, for example, scores of black men regularly get passed over by cab drivers. Reducing black identity to "victimhood" distorts the reality of true progress. For example, was Obama a victim of widespread racial oppression at the hand of "rich white people" before graduating from Columbia University, Harvard Law School *magna cum laude*, or after he acquired his estimated net worth of \$1.3 million? How did "rich white people" keep Obama from succeeding? If Obama is the model of an oppressed black man, I want to be oppressed next! With my graduate school debt, my net worth is literally negative \$52,659. The overall result, says McWhorter, is that "the remnants of discrimination hold an obsessive indignant fascination that allows only passing acknowledgement of any signs of progress." Jeremiah Wright, infused with victimology, wielded self-righteous indignation in the service of exposing the inadequacies Hillary Clinton's world of "rich white people." The perpetual creation of a racial identity born out of self-loathing and anxiety often spends more time inventing reasons to cry racism than working toward changing social mores, and often inhibits movement toward reconciliation and positive mobility.

McWhorter articulates three main objections to victimology: First, victimology condones weakness in failure. Victimology tacitly stamps approval on failure, lack of effort, and criminality. Behaviors and patterns that are self-destructive

are often approved of as cultural or presented as unpreventable consequences from previous systemic patterns. Black Liberation theologians are clear on this point: "People are poor because they are victims of others," says Dr. Dwight Hopkins, a black liberation theologian teaching at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Second, victimology hampers progress because, from the outset, it focuses attention on obstacles. For example, in Black liberation Theology, the focus is on the impediment of black freedom in light of the Goliath of white racism.

Third, victimology keeps racism alive because many whites are constantly painted as racist with no evidence provided. Racism charges create a context for backlash and resentment, fueling new attitudes among whites not previously held or articulated, and creates "separatism" – a suspension of moral judgment in the name of racial solidarity. Does Jeremiah Wright foster separatism or racial unity and reconciliation?

For black liberation theologians, Sunday is uniquely tied to redefining their sense of being human within a context of marginalization. "Black people who have been humiliated and oppressed by the structures of white society six days of the week gather together each Sunday morning in order to experience another definition of their humanity," says James Cone in his book *Speaking the Truth* (1999).

Many black theologians believe that both racism and socio-economic oppression continue to augment the fragmentation between whites and blacks. Historically speaking, it makes sense that black theologians would struggle with conceptualizing social justice and the problem of evil as it relates to the history of colonialism and slavery in the Americas.

Is black liberation theology helping? Wright's liberation theology has stirred up resentment, backlash, Obama defections, separatism, white guilt, caricature, and offense. Preaching to a congregation of middle-class blacks about their victim identity invites a distorted view of reality, fosters nihilism, and divides rather than unites.

Black Liberation Is Marxist Liberation

One of the pillars of Obama's home church, Trinity United Church of Christ, is "economic parity." On the website, Trinity claims that God is not pleased with "America's economic mal-distribution." Among all of controversial comments

by Jeremiah Wright, the idea of massive wealth redistribution is the most alarming. The code language "economic parity" and references to "mal-distribution" is nothing more than channeling the twisted economic views of Karl Marx. Black liberation theologians have explicitly stated a preference for Marxism as an ethical framework for the black church, because Marxist thought is predicated on a system of oppressor class (whites) versus victim class (blacks).

Black liberation theologians James Cone and Cornel West have worked diligently to embed Marxist thought into the black church since the 1970s. For Cone, Marxism best addressed remedies to the condition of blacks as victims of white oppression. In *For My People*, Cone explains that "the Christian faith does not possess in its nature the means for analyzing the structure of capitalism. Marxism as a tool of social analysis can disclose the gap between appearance and reality, and thereby help Christians to see how things really are."

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone said that Marx's chief contribution is "his disclosure of the ideological character of bourgeois thought, indicating the connections between the 'ruling material force of society' and the 'ruling intellectual' force." Marx's thought is useful and attractive to Cone, because it allows black theologians to critique racism in America on the basis of power and revolution.

For Cone, integrating Marx into black theology helps theologians see just how much social perceptions determine theological questions and conclusions. Moreover, these questions and answers are "largely a reflection of the material condition of a given society."

In 1979, Cornel West offered a critical integration of Marxism and black theology in his essay "Black Theology and Marxist Thought" because of the shared human experience of oppressed peoples as victims. West sees a strong correlation between black theology and Marxist thought, because "both focus on the plight of the exploited, oppressed, and degraded peoples of the world, their relative powerlessness and possible empowerment." This common focus prompts West to call for "a serious dialogue between Black theologians and Marxist thinkers" – a dialogue that centers on the possibility of "mutually arrived-at political action."

In his book *Prophesy Deliverance*, West believes that by working together, Marxists and black theologians can spearhead much-needed social change for those who are victims of oppression. He appreciates Marxism for its "notions

of class struggle, social contradictions, historical specificity, and dialectical developments in history" that explain the role of power and wealth in bourgeois capitalist societies. A common perspective among Marxist thinkers is that bourgeois capitalism creates and perpetuates ruling-class domination – which, for black theologians in America, means the domination and victimization of blacks by whites. America has been over run by "white racism within mainstream establishment churches and religious agencies," writes West.

Perhaps it is the Marxism embedded in Obama's attendance at Trinity Church that should raise red flags. "Economic parity" and "distribution" language implies things like government-coerced wealth redistribution, perpetual minimum wage increases, government subsidized healthcare for all, and the like. One of the priorities listed on Obama's campaign website reads, "Obama will protect tax cuts for poor and middle class families, but he will reverse most of the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest taxpayers."

Black liberation theology, originally intended to help the black community, may have actually hurt many blacks by promoting racial tension, victimology, and Marxism, which ultimately leads to more oppression. As the failed "War on Poverty" has exposed, the best way to keep the blacks perpetually enslaved to government as "daddy" is to preach victimology, Marxism, and to seduce blacks into thinking that upward mobility is someone else's responsibility in a free society.

Dr. Anthony Bradley is associate professor of religious studies at The King's College in New York City where he also serves as director for the Center for the Study of Human Flourishing. Since 2002, Dr. Bradley has been a research fellow at the Acton Institute. Dr. Bradley holds Bachelor of Science in biological sciences from Clemson University, a Master of Divinity from Covenant Theological Seminary, a Masters in Ethics and Society from Fordham University, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Westminster Theological Seminary.
abradley@acton.org