

From Black Theology to Best Self Theology

By Jaramogi Menelik Kimathi

Black theology developed because traditional *Christian theology was monopolized by the anglo-centric experience* and point of view. The great theologians of the Christian faith were all white and their point of view tended to reflect the interests of the group to which they belonged. Anything outside of this point of view was rejected as illegitimate and invalid. What they call “theology” was in fact, political theology designed to maintain the status quo. Any discussion aimed at expanding the discourse, to include the perspectives of the marginalized and oppressed were labeled unworthy of serious consideration as scholarship. As a result, the progressive black ministers who were involved in their community’s efforts to attain civil rights did not have a theological foundation that gave their efforts religious sanction. This created a kind of schizophrenia in their preaching. They were progressive community leaders during the week, but on Sunday they were delivering the same preaching message that was inherited on the plantation.

It wasn’t until *Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Jr. began to weave the black experience of struggle into his interpretation of Christianity* that a new theology began to gradually emerge in the 1950’s. As an organic intellectual shaped by the black tradition of struggle, Rev. Cleage was not concerned with academic acceptance of his point of view. His focus was on developing a theological foundation that could enable the black Christian church to be meaningfully involved in the struggle to change conditions for black people. Forging ahead on this path, his point of view evolved into a new theology that rejected the authority of white theologians to monopolize Christian thought. With widespread acceptance of the Black Messiah -a book of seventeen sermons reflecting Christianity from the perspective of the black experience in 1967- the monopoly of white academics was broken. Subsequently, other marginalized groups felt free to interpret Christianity in light of their own experience. This was a watershed event in Christian theology because it changed the yardstick of measurement for determining theological validity. Rather than deriving the authority to discern the will of God from scripture and the church, Cleage asserted that we can discern the will of God from our own group experience. Although greatly respected and much ballyhooed, Rev. Cleage never did seek acceptance by the white religious establishment. He was more concerned with creating a tool that could make the black church relevant to black peoples’ struggle for freedom, justice and power.

Black theology was focused on the social issues that kept black people oppressed. But as early as 1975, Cleage became aware that the black experience of oppression and exploitation had been internalized, rendering black people incapable of sustained intelligent action to change their condition. As a result, he advocated a change process for a people who, “*suffered not only from a slave condition but also a slave mentality*” Black Church as a Change Agent, 1975. (*Psychologists later verified this mentality and it was named, post-traumatic slavery syndrome,*

Joy DeGruy Leary, 2005). This realization led to the development of the BCN Change Process and later the Science of KUA that provided the foundation for Best Self Theology to emerge.

Best Self Theology

Best-Self theology began with the realization that all social revolutions had failed to change society because they had failed to change people. ***Best-self theology asserts that we can only change the world by changing ourselves and that ultimately ourselves are the only things we can control.***

Best Self Theology begins with the belief that all human beings are endowed by God with a ***spark of divinity that gives us the dynamic potential to perpetually learn, grow, improve and adapt.*** The life force that gives us life is God. ***Our life is essentially cosmic energy and creative intelligence expressing itself through us.*** Growth, development, and learning are basic to life in all its forms. Life stretches struggles and strives for full expression. Life seeks abundant life. ***The object of life is to flourish.*** Our inner divinity gives us a natural inner drive to attain the highest expression of our humanity (see self-determination theory).

Hence, the maximization of our potential is our primary religious obligation. This means that perpetual personal evolution is a form of worship. What we do with the life we have been given is the most complete way to testify to our relationship with God. We all have the ability to maximize our potential or squander it. To squander our potential is sin. The development of our gifts, talents, skills and intellect is cooperating with God who is the life force that animates us is the greatest witness to our faith. ***Best-Self theology is about becoming our best possible selves as the ultimate act of worship.***

Best-self theology asserts that our ***first divine obligation is to develop our God given potential.*** The ***second divine obligation is to use our developed potential to serve God by serving others.*** Best Self Theology is guided by the precept that service is the highest praise. The development of our potential is not a purely selfish pursuit. Life imposes upon us the obligation to serve. We are expected to maximize our potential through will, effort discipline and faith, then, use it to advance divine purposes.