

THE EMERGENCE OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND BLACK THEOLOGY

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Abstract

For around 350 years, blacks in America were deprived of land, property, and equality in every sphere of life. Most of the African Americans are descendants of various ethnic groups, mostly from Western and Central Africa, brought directly from Africa to America as slaves. Therefore, the history of Blacks is considered as African American history rather than American history only. During the 1960s, Civil Rights Movements started in America under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. The movement started with the claiming of the lost identity of the Black masses. It incorporated social movements in the United States, intending to end racial segregation and discrimination against Black Americans by White Americans and to secure legal recognition and federal protection of the citizenship's rights. The Civil Rights Movement led to the emergence of Black Theology through interpreting the Gospel in the light of the sufferings and hopes of the Black Americans.

Key-Words: Civil Rights Movement, Black Theology, African Americans, Biblical Re-interpretation.

Introduction

The dominance of one race towards another race is term as racism. It has resulted in discrimination and prejudice to the people based on their race and ethnicity. Although, there is not a single use of the term. There are some examples of institutional racism which include the Holocaust, the Apartheid system in South Africa, slavery and segregation in the United States, and slavery in Latin America. Racism is an aspect of the social organization of many colonial states and empires. Therefore, racism and racial discrimination are frequently used to describe

discrimination on an ethnic or cultural basis. The ideology of racism can be expressed in several aspects of social life. Racism can be present in social actions, practices, or political systems (Apartheid) that support the manifestation of prejudice or hatred in the form of discriminatory practices.

The present paper attempts to analyze how the Civil Rights Movement that helps to concretize Black theology. How racial discrimination paved the way for the counter-theological reinterpretation of the Biblical texts and Gospels in the light of the experience of the Blacks? To what extent Black theology helps the black people in the process of realizing equality and eliminating racial discrimination in the church and society.

Different forms of Racism

Racism can be classified as Individual racism, Institutional racism, and Cultural racism. The first dimension of Individual racism speaks about the question of existence inside a prison. Moreover, it is about the declaration that true freedom cannot be taken from us; that it is possible to be free, even inside a prison. The second dimension is presented through an invitation to join a large number of prisoners who are developing strategies to break out of the prison of racism. (Barndt 1991: pp 64-66) Second, Institutional racism is practiced in two ways - direct and indirect institutional racism. Direct institutional racism is always conscious and intentional. This is open and publicly practiced without admission of guilt or shame. Indirect racism is both intentional and unintentional. When it is intentional, indirect racism is deliberately disguised so that the public will be not aware of it. Whereas, unintentional indirect racism is more complex and difficult to eliminate. (Barndt 1991: pp 81-100) The third form of racism that is cultural racism. In recent years, the culture has become a major factor in the development of new alternatives for racial justice in church and society. Culture is an extension of not only the race but also of religious, social, or ethnic identities. For example, within Africa, there are several diverse cultures and subcultures. This is similarly true in Asia, Latin America, and Europe. (Barndt 1991: pp 101-109)

Racial segregation has created five noticeably separated racial/cultural groupings in the United States. These are - the Native Americans who are indigenous to North America, Hispanics from South America, Central America, and the Caribbean; Asians who come from the diversities of Asian countries, African Americans, whose roots are in many African countries. These five groups have also been greatly affected in another way by racism and other forms of exploitation. Some of the most powerful expressions of culture are created in the fires of suffering and exploitation. (Barndt 1991: p 102)

The Emergence of Civil Rights Movement

Numerous movements were carried out to counter the existing situation of racial discrimination. Among them, the Civil Rights Movement was a remarkable attempt to fight against the prevailing situation in America. The Civil

Rights Movement was a worldwide series of political movements for equality before the law that was peaked in the 1960s. In many situations, it took the form of campaigns of civil resistance which aimed in achieving changes through non-violence. The main aim of the movements for civil rights included ensuring the rights of all people are equally protected by the law, including the rights of minorities, the rights of women, and racial rights. The movement also led to the protests of students against the war in Vietnam throughout the African - American community. It also provided the key messages who were struggling for justice and against oppression based on racism.

The act of 1964, which ended in a public place and banned discrimination of employment based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, was considered one of the greatest legislative achievements of the civil rights movement. In the following years, Congress expanded the act and passed additional civil rights legislation such as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, segregation on the grounds of race, religion, or national origin was banned at all places of public accommodation, including courthouses, parks, restaurants, theatres, sports stadiums, and hotels. Hence, no longer could black and other minorities be denied service based on the color of their skin. The act also banned race, religious, national origin, and gender discrimination by employers and labor unions and created an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission with the power to file lawsuits on behalf of distressed workers.

Martin Luther King Jr. was an American Baptist minister and activist who became the most noticeable orator and leader in the civil rights movement from 1954. King led the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott and in 1957 was became the first president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He also organized the 1963 March on Washington, where he delivered "I Have a Dream" speech. I Have a Dream was a public speech that was delivered by the King during the March on Washington for jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. (Hansen 2003: p 177) Moreover, he called for civil and economic rights and the end of racism in the United States. King defined his dreams of freedom and equality arising from a land of slavery and hatred. Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. said that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was nothing less than "second emancipation". The Act was a landmark on civil rights and U.S labor law. It prohibited unequal application of voter registration requirements, racial segregation in schools, employment, and public accommodations. The Civil Rights Act was later expanded to bring disabled Americans, the elderly, and women under its umbrella.

Another incredible activist of the Civil Rights Movement was Malcolm X. He was an American Muslim minister and human rights activist. He was a courageous advocate for the rights of blacks, a man who accused white preaching of racism and violence. He has been called one of the prominent and most influential African Americans in history. He continued to emphasize Pan-Africanism, black self-determination, and black defense.

Reinterpretation of the Biblical Texts in the Light of Blacks

Black theology was developed from the Civil Rights Movements in the United States, during the 1960s. The movement had started in claiming the lost identity of black people. The Civil Rights Movements were a worldwide series of political movements for equality before the law peaked in the 1960s. It included social movements in the United States. The goals were to end racial segregation and discrimination against black Americans in the United States.

The black people in America were being continually tortured by the white masses, as slaves more than 350yrs. The whites tortured Blacks in every way possible in American society. Moreover, in America, blacks were deprived of land, property, and equality in every sphere of life. Though, the history of Blacks and their culture were more ancient and rich compared to whites. That is the reason why black history is considered as the American-African history rather than American history.

Blacks live with the tension between life and death in society. Blacks are continually governed by the whites in every possible way. Hence, Blacks are constantly searching for identity because of the oppression of whites. As a result, the Blacks try to re-interpret the Biblical texts from their contextual standpoints. Moreover, the search for black identity is the search for God because the identity of God is revealed in the struggle of blacks to get freedom. In this connection, Paul Tillich said that man discovered himself when he discovered God. Also, Black theology is a survival theology because it seeks to interpret the theological significance of being with a community. Therefore, it inspires to affirm the essence of blackness and to revolt against oppressors. (Cone 2010: pp 11-18)

Any interpretation that does not focus on the liberation and freedom of the poor and underprivileged is not considered the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Black theology is about solidarity with the poor in the African American community. Moreover, Black theology teaches to break the silence and also one with the word of God to American society and theology. Black theology is a symbol of power where the oppression of white prevails and the black search for liberation in contemporary America. Hence, Christian theology must be interpreted for the oppressed. It also quests for the meaning of God's liberation in the community.

Theological language is about a passionate language. It is the language of commitment to overthrow the unjust society. Moreover, passionate language is a 'risk of faith'; in this connection, Tillich said it as 'existential risk'. Therefore, blacks must take the risk of faith and speak with desire in harmony with the revolutionary spirit of the oppressed. Also, blacks reject the present situation to overcome the problems in American society. (Cone 2010: pp 18-21)

Black theology is considered a rational theology. Theology helps the oppressed to realize the inner conviction for liberation in the Biblical texts and Gospels. First, the Yahweh, through 'covenant' made the people of Israel as God's people and wanted to uplift from the unjust condition of Egyptian hands. Second, the prophet of Israel was considered a prophet of social justice. It was said that Yahweh was the God of justice and righteousness and wanted to bring social, political as well as economic stability in society. Third, Jesus did the liberating work for the oppressed and marginalized for the liberation. The resurrection of Jesus was also defined by the oppressed community. Moreover, liberation is hope in God. It also rejects inequalities in the future.

The whites were denied the historical aspects of Jesus's action for the oppressed. To contest, the Black theologians put three points –

First, in connection with a revolutionary situation, there is not a partisan theology. Here theology is identified in two ways, one that maintained oppression is considered anti-Christ and another who were victims of authentic Christian. Second, God is not a color-blind, but it is an analogues view. It was evident that Yahweh and Jesus in the Old Testament and New Testament respectively sided with the oppressed. In the third one, there was not an authentic ethical guide who could lead God's movement in the world. So to get liberated, the Blacks have to take the burden and go for an existential situation of freedom.

There are six types of sources in construction to Black theology, they are – Black experience, Black history, Black culture, revelation, scripture, and tradition.

First, the experience of humiliation and suffering in the daily life of the black masses is the black experience. With their existing situations, black wants to know about Jesus. Black's soul comes from the totality of black experience. Second, Black history is about the long history of Black's enslavement. By reconsidering the history, the Blacks fight for freedom in American society against white oppressors. Third, Black culture is also closely related to the experience and history of blacks. The culture of Black is a creative form of expression that reflects through the history which undergoes pain, joy, and experience. Revolting against the whites is considered as the history and culture of the Black masses. Therefore, the black understand some co-relations between the Divine salvation and black culture that are meant for the Divine purpose. Fourth, the revelation of God comes from the cultural situations of the oppressed. The above characteristics are crucial to comprehend the concept of revelation. God established the new order by putting down the old one through the revelation of God. God became a human being in Jesus by proclaiming the kingdom of God. The fifth source is the Old Testament and the New Testament. Sixth, the Black theologians believe that the New Testament comes from the tradition. Moreover,

Blacktheology is concerned with the tradition that is usable for blacks and to the context in the prevailing situations in America. (Cone 2010: pp 24-36)

Conclusion

From the above discussions, we can sum up that the search for the lost identity of the black gets accelerated from the Civil Rights Movement. Moreover, the root of the identity of blacks comes from ancient American-African history too. Also to a great extent, the Civil Rights Movement helps the black masses to initiate with greater needs in the contemporary era with the multi-dimensional challenges that were being created and maintained for a long time by the white within the domain of racial discrimination. Therefore, Blacktheology seeks to eradicate the problems of racial discrimination and exclusion in the light of black's experience through the re-interpretation of the Biblical texts and Gospels. Moreover, the Black theologians are also deliberated to quest for the egalitarian society free from any discrimination.

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