GOD OF THE OPPRESSED

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White American Theology

The dialectic of theology and social existence is particularly obvious in its white American branch when that theology is related to the people of African descent on the American continent. While some white theologians in the twentieth century have emphasized the relativity of faith in history, they have seldom applied this insight to the problem of the color line.21 Because the conceptual framework of their consciousness has been shaped already by white sociopolitical interests, their exposition of the problem of faith and history is limited to defending the intellectual status of religious assertions against erosion by historical criticism. Even a casual look at the contemporary discussion of
the problem of faith in the context of the historical-critical method reveals that such problems are unique to oppressors as they seek to reconcile traditional theology with modern scientific thinking about history.

It is not that the problem of faith and history is unimportant. Rather, its importance, as defined by white theologians, is limited to their social interests. Although oppressed blacks are interested in faith as they struggle in history, the shape of the faith-history problem in contemporary American theology did not arise from the social existence of black people. On the contrary, its character was shaped by those who, sharing the consciousness of the Enlightenment, failed to question the consequences of the so-called enlightened view as reflected in the colonization and slavery of that period.

Perhaps it is true to say, as does Van Harvey, that the Enlightenment created a “revolution in the consciousness of Western man”, but not all people are Western and not all people in the West experienced the Enlightenment in the same way. For black and red peoples in North America, the spirit of the Enlightenment was socially and politically demonic, becoming a pseudo-intellectual basis for their enslavement or extermination.

Through an examination of the contemporary white theological scene, it is clear that the children of the Enlightenment have simply accepted the issues passed on by their grandparents. Although the historical events of the twentieth century have virtually destroyed the nineteenth-century confidence in the goodness of humanity and the inevitable progress of history, twentieth-century white theologians are still secure in their assumption that important theological issues emerge, primarily if not exclusively, out of the white experience. Despite the sit-ins and pray-ins, the civil rights movement and black power, Martin Luther King and Stokely Carmichael, white theologians still continue their business as usual. These theologians fail to realize that such a procedure is just as racist and oppressive against black people as Billy Graham’s White House sermons. This is so because the black judgment on this matter is that those who are not for us must be against us.

In this connection, one is reminded of an observation by Karl Marx: “Philosophy [and we could add theology] and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love.” Since most professional theologians are the descendants of the advantaged class and thus often represent the consciousness of the class, it is difficult not to conclude that their theologies are in fact a bourgeois exercise in intellectual masturbation. Certainly, if one takes seriously the exploitation and suffering of black people in America and Jesus’ proclamation that he came “to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18 RSV), then the absence of the urgency of the gospel of black liberation in modern and contemporary American theology cannot only confirm Marx’s contention that “your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property... [For] the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.”

Unfortunately, American theology from Cotton Mather to Reinhold Niebuhr and Schubert Ogden, including radicals and conservatives, have interpreted the gospel according to the cultural and political interests of white people. They have rarely attempted to transcend the social interests of their group by seeking an analysis of the gospel in the light of the consciousness of black people struggling for liberation. White theologians, because of their identity with the dominant power structure, are largely boxed within their own cultural history.

During slavery the social limitation of white theology was expressed in three main forms: (1) some white theologians ignored slavery as a theological issue; (2) others justified it; and (3) only a few spoke out against it.

First, it was not uncommon for Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and other assorted denominational theologians to do theology as if slavery did not exist. For example, Jonathan Edwards, often called America’s most outstanding theologian, could preach and write theological treatises on total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints without the slightest hint of how these issues related to human bondage. He simply defined the gospel in the light of his Calvinistic heritage, and with unusual conceptual skills derived from the
Enlightenment, he defended the Reformed faith. If pressed, he perhaps would have expressed his sentiments for the cause of freedom. But what is crucial is that his understanding of the theological task did not consciously or directly involve the political issue of slavery. Many of his contemporaries followed his example.

The second group of theologians represent those who defended the slave institution on theological grounds. Cotton Mather was one of its early spokesmen. He urged white people to teach their slaves “that it is GOD who has caused them to be Servants, and that they serve JESUS CHRIST, while they are at Work for their Masters.” Since Mather owned slaves, it is obvious that that fact alone would influence his theological observations. But he was not unique. Other highly visible spokesman for “God” defended slavery, including George Whitefield and Thomas Bacon.28

The influence of social realities on theological reflections was particularly obvious in the Methodist and Baptist churches’ reaction to the issue of slavery during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Immediately following the Revolutionary War, both churches, responding to the ethos of freedom, took radical positions against slavery. In 1780 at the Baltimore Conference, the Methodists condemned slavery as “contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society.”29 And four years later, at the Christmas Conference of 1784, they strengthened their position. They “voted to expel all slaveholding members of Methodist societies . . . who would not, within twelve months after due notification, perfect a legal document to manumit all their slaves when they reached certain specific ages. The conference also voted to expel immediately all Methodists who bought (except for the purpose of liberation) or sold slaves.”30 Many Baptists took similar action throughout the south.

But by the beginning of the nineteenth century, when cotton became king, the churches allowed the change in social reality to influence a change in their religious views. The Methodists not only suspended their 1784 rules within six months but in 1816 a General Conference committee reported:

The committee . . . are of opinion that, under the present existing circumstances in relation to slavery, little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice. They are sorry to say that the evil appears to be past remedy. . . . Your committee find that in the South and West the civil authorities render emancipation impracticable, and . . . they are constrained to admit that to bring about such a change in the civil code as would favor the cause of liberty is not in the power of the General Conference.28

Other churches made similar compromising statements, creating not only a place for slaveholders in the churches but providing a context for the adamant defenders of the peculiar institution. Indeed, as late as 1900, Charles Carroll wrote a book entitled The Negro a Beast. Although many clergymen condemned it, the attitude of the churches on slavery in particular and black people generally prepared the way for its appearance.

The third group of theologians were those who openly condemned slavery. Persons in this group included John Woolman, Leonard Bacon, William Ellery Channing, and Theodore Weld. The latter achieved national prominence for his fight against slavery. He published his views in two works, The Bible against Slavery (1837) and American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses (1839). Weld and other white abolitionists should be commended for their courage in taking a stand against the cultural and theological ethos of their time. They are concrete examples that social existence is not mechanical and deterministic. The gospel grants people the freedom to transcend their cultural history and to affirm a dimension of universality common to all peoples.

However, even Weld and most white abolitionists were partly limited by their cultural history still viewing humanity from a white perspective, usually as defined by the Enlightenment.29 They almost never used the resources of black culture as an approach to the problem of slavery but simply assumed that black freedom would result from the end of legal servitude. This may explain why “the constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society failed to mention social equality as an objective” and why
its members considered its work completed after the Civil War.30

The attitudes of these three groups are still with us today. The second group is primarily represented in conservative churches and seminaries of the South. It is most dramatically symbolized in Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. Of course, their view of the gospel is not arrived at through an open encounter with the biblical message, but is exclusively determined by the continued social and political dominance of whites over blacks. They are the best examples that religious conservatism and white racism are often two sides of the same reality.

Theological representatives in the third group are quite rare in contemporary theology. To my knowledge, only one white theologian, Frederick Herzog in Liberation Theology, has attempted to reorder theological priorities in the light of the oppression of black people. Others like Paul Lehmann, Richard Schauss, and Carl Braaten have been defining the theological task according to “the politics of God,” relating theology to the struggle of liberation throughout the world.31 The difference between Herzog’s way of doing theology and the persons just named is the manner in which the former calls into question typical theological options. He not only makes the oppressed and their liberation as his theological point of departure, but he also rejects the process theologies of John Cobb and Schubert Ogden because he does not see how abstract arguments about God relate to the marginal people or the land.32 What difference does it make if one should “prove” a philosophical point, if that point has nothing to do with spreading of freedom throughout the land? Whatever else may be said about Herzog’s Liberation Theology, it is concrete evidence that white theologians do not have to remain enclosed in their little white boxes.

Nevertheless most white theologians who attend learned societies and write books and articles on theology fall in the first group. These theologians believe in rigorous scholarship and disciplined scientific thinking, but this process invariably fails to grapple with the problem of color. They conveniently play down the fact that their very definition of theology is culturally bound and thus belies their claims about universality. Indeed, if we take seriously H. Richard Niebuhr’s observation that “theological opinions have their roots in the relationship of the religious life to the cultural and political conditions prevailing in any group of Christians,”33 then it is perhaps correct to conclude that the various white theological perspectives which ignore color are nothing but white cultural projections.

Consider the definitions of theology by Harold DeWolf and Paul Tillich. The former says: “Systematic Theology is the critical discipline devoted to discovering, expounding and defending the more important truths implied in the experience of the Christian community.”34 The latter says: “Theology, as a function of the Christian Church, must serve the needs of the Church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.”35 Despite my affinity with the existential orientation of Tillich against DeWolf’s rationalism, there is a conspicuous cultural similarity in them. Neither one defines theology as a discipline which speaks for and about the liberation of the oppressed from political bondage. May we conclude that this is just a careless oversight and that, like Jonathan Edwards, they would take their stand with the oppressed? Certainly, this is the case, as Tillich’s early theological treatises demonstrate and so does DeWolf’s stand on civil rights. It is not my intention to question the integrity of their personal ethics. My concern is with the essence of Christian theology and the influence of culture on a theologian’s understanding of the theological task. Because DeWolf and Tillich were not politically threatened in America, they did not include politics in their theological point of departure. In accepting the axiologic system of American culture, they were prevented from regarding the political suffering of black people as critical evidence for the shaping of their theological perspectives. I would also contend that they missed the decisive ingredient of the gospel message. For if the essence of the gospel is the liberation of the oppressed from sociopolitical humiliation for a new freedom in Christ Jesus (and I do not see how anyone can read the Scriptures and conclude otherwise), and if Christian theology is an explication of the meaning of that gospel for our time, must not theology
itself have liberation as its starting point or run the risk of being at best idle talk and at worst blasphemy?

The same conclusion can be drawn from most other contemporary theologians. Because white theologians live in a society that is racist, the oppression of black people does not occupy an important item on their theological agenda. Again as Karl Marx put it: "It is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness." Because white theologians are well fed and speak for a people who control the means of production, the problem of hunger is not a theological issue for them. That is why they spend more time debating the relation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith than probing the depths of Jesus' command to feed the poor. It is theologically much more comfortable to write essays and books about the authenticity or non-authenticity of this or that word of Jesus than it is to hear his Word of liberation, calling the humiliated into existence for freedom. To hear Jesus' Word of liberation requires a radical decision, not just about my self-understanding (although that is definitely included, as Rudolf Bultmann clearly demonstrated) but about practice, a decision that defines theology as a weapon in the struggle of the little ones for liberation.

The history of white American theology illustrates the concept of the social a priori asserted by Werner Stark and the other sociologists of knowledge whom we discussed earlier. The social environment functions as a "mental grid," deciding what will be considered as relevant data in a given inquiry. For example, because white theologians are not the sons and daughters of black slaves but the descendants of white slave masters, their theological grid automatically excludes from the field of perception the data of Richard Allen, Henry H. Garnet, and Nathaniel Paul, David Walker, and Henry M. Turner. This same axiological grid accounts for the absence of the apocalyptic expectations of the spirituals among the so-called "hope theologians"; and the same explanation can be given why the white existentialists do not say anything about absurdity in the blues. Why would we even expect them to say something, since their value system is the reason why so many blacks had to sing.

The social context of theology

Sometimes I feel like nothin', somethin' 'twowed away,
Then I get my guitar and play the blues all day.

Great awamighty, folks feelin' bad,
Lost everything they ever had.

The mental grid influences not only what books theologians read when doing their research, but also which aspects of personal experience will shape theological style and methodology. Again it is obvious that because white theologians were not enslaved and lynched and are not ghettoized because of color, they do not think that color is an important point of departure for theological discourse. Color is not universal they say, moving on to what they regard as the more important problems of theological scholarship. Universalism is a social product and it remains such even (especially) when it is legitimated in pious or scholarly language. The only way people can enhance their vision of the universal is to break out of their cultural and political boxes and encounter another reality. They must be challenged to take seriously another value system. That is, instead of studying only Jonathan Edwards, they must also examine the reality of David Walker. Here truth is expanded beyond the limitations of white culture.

Black Religious Thought

Like white American theology, black thought on Christianity has been influenced by its social context. But unlike white theologians, who spoke to and for the culture of the ruling class, black people's religious ideas were shaped by the cultural and political existence of the victims in North America. Unlike Europeans who immigrated to this land to escape from tyranny, Africans came in chains to serve a nation of tyrants. It was the slave experience that shaped our idea of this land. And this difference in social existence between Europeans and Africans must be recognized, if we are to understand correctly the contrast in the form and content of black and white theology.
What then is the form and content of black religious thought when viewed in the light of their social situation? Briefly, the form of black religious thought is expressed in the style of story and its content is liberation. Black Theology, then, is the story of black people's struggle for liberation in an extreme situation of oppression. Consequently there is no sharp distinction between thought and practice, worship and theology, because black theological reflections about God occurred in the black struggle for freedom.

White theologians built logical systems; black folks told tales. Whites debated the validity of infant baptism or the issue of predestination and free will; blacks recited biblical stories about God leading the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Joshua and the battle of Jericho, and the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. While theologians argued about the general status of religious assertions in view of the development of science generally and Darwin's Origin of Species in particular, blacks were more concerned about their status in American society and its relation to the biblical claim that Jesus came to set the captives free. White thought on the Christian view of salvation was largely "spiritual" and sometimes "rational," but usually separated from the concrete struggle of freedom in this world. Black thought was largely eschatological and never abstract, but usually related to their struggle against earthly oppression.

The difference in the form of black and white religious thought is, on the one hand, sociological. Since blacks were slaves and had to work from sun-up to nightfall, they did not have time for the art of philosophical and theological discourse. They, therefore, did not know about the systems of Augustine, Calvin, or Edwards. And if Ernst Bloch is correct in his contention that "need is the mother of thought," then it can be said that black slaves did not need to know about Anselm's ontological argument, Descartes's Cogito, ergo sum, and Kant's Ding an sich. Such were not their philosophical and theological problems as defined by their social reality. Blacks did not ask whether God existed or whether divine existence can be rationally demonstrated. Divine existence was taken for granted, because God was the point of departure of their faith. The divine question which they addressed was whether or not God was with them in their struggle for liberation. Neither did blacks ask about the general status of their personal existence or that of the physical world. The brutal presence of white people did not allow that sort of philosophical skepticism to enter their consciousness. Therefore the classical philosophical debate about the priority of concepts versus things, which motivated Kant and his predecessors' reflective endeavors, did not interest black people. What was "real" was the presence of oppression and the historical need to strive against it. They intuitively perceived that the problem of the auction block and slave drivers would not be solved through philosophical debate. The problem had to be handled at the level of concrete history as that history was defined by the presence of the slave masters. Slaves therefore had to devise a language commensurate with their social situation. That was why they told stories. Through the medium of stories, black slaves created concrete and vivid pictures of their past and present existence, using the historical images of God's dealings with his people and thus breaking open a future for the oppressed not known to ordinary historical observation.

The difference between black and white thought is also theological. Black people did not devise various philosophical arguments for God's existence, because the God of black experience was not a metaphysical idea. He was the God of history, the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage. Jesus was not an abstract Word of God, but God's Word made flesh who came to set the prisoner free. He was the "Lamb of God" that was born in Bethlehem and was slain on Golgotha's hill. He was also "the Risen Lord" and "the King of Kings." He was their Alpha and Omega, the One who had come to make the first last and the last first.

While white preachers and theologians often defined Jesus Christ as a spiritual Savior, the deliverer of people from sin and guilt, black preachers were unquestionably historical. They viewed God as the Liberator in history. That was why the black Church was involved in the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century and the civil rights movement in the twentieth. Black preachers reasoned that if God delivered Israel from
Pharaoh's army and Daniel from the lion's den, then he will deliver black people from American slavery and oppression. So the content of their thought was liberation and the communication that message through preaching, singing, and praying, telling their story of how "we shall overcome."

Consider the song about that "Old Ship of Zion" and how "she had landed many thousand, ... and will land as many a more. O glory, Hallelujah!" They say "she is loaded down with angels," ... and "King Jesus is the Captain." The presence of Jesus as the Captain was black people's assurance that the ship would "carry [them] all home." The "Old Ship of Zion" was a symbol that their life had meaning despite the condition of servitude. It was their guarantee that their future was in the hands of the One who died on Calvary. That was why they proclaimed: "Glory hallelujah!" It was an affirmation of faith that black slaves would triumph over life's contradictions, because they had met the Captain of that "Old Ship of Zion" and were already on board.

At other times, the salvation story was described as "the gospel train." Blacks described this reality with eschatological and future expectation: "The gospel train is coming." And they also saw it as already realized in their present: "I hear it just at hand!" and "the car wheels moving and rumbling thro' the land." One can "hear the bell and the whistle" and its "coming round the curve." Of course, this is not a normal train, not one created by white society. This is an eschatological train, the train of salvation and it will carry the oppressed to glory. If you miss this train "you're left behind." That partly accounts for the urgency of the call to

Get on board, Children,
Get on board, Children,
Get on board, Children,
There's room for many a more.

Salvation was not only a train and a ship but also a sweet chariot, swinging low, "coming for to carry me home." It was that "Old time religion" that brought the slaves out of bondage, and "good when you're in trouble." It's that "rock in a weary land" and the "shelter in the time of storm." It was the divine presence in their situation that held their humanity together in the midst of the brokenness of black existence. It was the power to endure in struggle and the patience to remain calm when surrounded by inexplicable evil. That was why black people sang, "Been down in the valley so long, and I ain't got weary yet." They did not give up in despair during slavery and subsequent oppression, because of the presence of the One who controls life and who can overcome its contradictions. This is the theme of black religion, and it was expressed in concrete images derived from their social situation.

The relation between the form and the content of black thought was dialectical. The story was both the medium through which truth was communicated and also a constituent of truth itself. In the telling of a truthful story, the reality of liberation to which the story pointed was also revealed in the actual telling of the story itself. That was why an equal, and often greater, emphasis was placed on the storyteller.

In black churches, the one who preaches the Word is primarily a storyteller. And thus when the black church community invites a minister as pastor, their chief question is "Can the Reverend tell the story?" This question refers both to the theme of black religion and also to the act of storytelling itself. It refers to a person's ability to recite God's historical dealings with his people from Abraham to Jesus, from St. Paul to John on the island of Patmos, and to the preacher's ability to relate these biblical stories to contemporary black stories. The past and present are joined dialectically, creating a black vision of the future.

Black churches usually do not emphasize academic degrees as a criterion for preaching, because they do not associate a learned discourse with storytelling. Indeed many blacks are suspicious of
"intellectuals" in the pulpit, because of their identity of that term with white people. Black church people contend that one needs more than "book-learning" in order to tell God's story. One needs to be converted to the faith and called to the ministry of Jesus Christ. When these two events happen, then one is ready to be used by God as the instrument of his story, of his dealings with his people.

In the black Church, little emphasis is placed on the modern distinction between liberals and fundamentalists as found in white churches. Blacks show little concern about the abstract status of the Bible, whether fallible or infallible. Their concern is with the Scripture as a living reality in the concreteness of their existence. Since the biblical story of God's dealings with people can be told in various ways, the chief concern of the people is not the information the preacher includes in his message but, rather, how he arranges that information into a story and how he relates it all to the daily lives of the people. The preacher may begin with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden or with John on the island of Patmos. The concern is not where he begins because the people already know the various scenes in God's drama with his people. They are concerned with how the preacher takes the bare facts of God's story and weaves them into the structure of their lives, giving his unique touch as a storyteller.

Consider the sermon "Behold the Rib!" The preacher begins by emphasizing the power of God. He is "High-riding and strong armed God" who "walk[s] across his globe creation . . . wid de blue elements for a helmet, . . . and a wall of fire round his feet." "He wakes the sun every morning from its fiery bed wid de breath of his smile and commands de moon wid his eyes." Then the preacher moves to the essence of the story as suggested by his subject:

So God put Adam into a deep sleep
And took out a bone, ah hah!
And it is said that it was a rib.
Behold de rib!
A bone out of man's side.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THEOLOGY

He put de man to sleep and made wo-man,
And men and women been sleeping together ever since.
Behold the rib!

Brothers, if God
Had taken dat bone out of man's head
He would have meant for woman to rule, hah.
If he had taken a bone out of his foot,
He would have meant for us to dominize and rule.
He could have made her out of back-bone
And then she would have been behind us.
But, no, God Almighty, he took de bone out of his side
So dat places de woman beside us;
Hafi! God knowed his own mind.
Behold the rib! 99

This sermon stresses not only the power of God but the equality of man and woman in God's creation. The rib rather than symbolizing the woman's inferiority actually stands for equal status, the right to be fully human. That is why the preacher placed so much emphasis on the phrase "Behold de rib!" The rib is not a "footbone" or a "back-bone," both of which represent inferiority. It is a "side-bone," thereby making woman equal to man.

Sometimes it was difficult to understand the exact verbal point the black preacher was making. But because the power of the story was embedded in the act of telling itself, it did not always matter. One could hear the message in the passion and mood which was created by the rising and falling of the voice as the preacher moved in bodily rhythm across the pulpit and in the aisle, describing rapidly the different scenes of God's salvation drama. The message was in the feeling of the Spirit that moved "from heart to heart and from breast to breast" throughout the congregation as the preacher hummed and moaned the story. The truth of the story was dependent upon whether the people received that extra strength to go one more mile in their struggle to survive and whether they received the courage to strive one more time to right the wrongs in this world. The message was the passion for affirming the truth of their lives, a truth not recognized in the white world. And this "knowledge"
was received every time the biblical story was preached as it was meant to be. That was why the people inquired of every minister: "Can the Reverend tell the story?"

The theme of liberation expressed in story form is the essence of black religion. Both content and form were essentially determined by black people's social existence. Because black people were oppressed but not destroyed by it, they intuitively knew that servitude was a denial of their essential worth. They therefore looked for religious and secular themes in their social existence that promised release from the pain of slavery and oppression. It was not simply through exegesis of the Bible that blacks decided to center their preaching on the Exodus and not on Paul's letter to Philemon; neither was it through exegesis that they centered their spirituals on the cross and resurrection of Jesus and not on his birth in Bethlehem. In view of their social situation of oppression, black people needed liberating visions so that they would not let historical limitations determine their perception of black being. Therefore when Christianity was taught to them and they began to read the Bible, blacks simply appropriated those biblical stories that met their historical need. That was why some themes are stressed and others are overlooked. The one theme that stood out above all other themes was liberation, and that was because of the social conditions of slavery. Such traditional Calvinistic problems as unconditional election and limited atonement did not occur to them. They did not debate religion on an abstract theological level but lived their religion concretely in history.

Like the theme of liberation, the form of black religion in story was chosen for similar sociological reasons. The easiest way for the oppressed to defy conceptual definitions that justify their existence in servitude is to tell stories about another reality where they are accepted as human beings. Story is not only easy to understand and to remember, it is often deceptive to those who stand outside the community where it was created. This is the meaning behind the black comment:

The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.  

What white slave masters would have recognized that the tales of Br'er Rabbit and his triumphs over the stronger animals actually expressed black slaves' conscious hopes and dreams of overcoming the slave masters themselves? Who among the white community would have perceived that in the singing and preaching about "crossing the river Jordan and entering the New Jerusalem" black slaves were sometimes talking about Canada, Africa, and America north of the Mason-Dixon line? White slave masters were no brighter than our contemporary white theologians who can only see in black religion what their axiological presuppositions permit them to see. And that vision usually extends no further than some notion of black "otherworldliness" leading to passivity. But there is something much deeper than that simplistic idea in black religion. Nat Turner's spirit is buried beneath the shouts and the cries. And that spirit will soon rise and claim the eschatological future promised in God's encounter with his community.

It is difficult to express this liberating truth in rational discourse alone, it must be told in story. And when this truth is told as it was meant to be, the oppressed are transformed, taken into another world and given a glimpse of the promised land. And when they leave the church, they often say to one another what the disciples said after having experienced the Risen Lord: "Did not our hearts burn within while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures" (Luke 24:32).