

Religion and Revolution

In 1999, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, to their credit proclaimed a national strategy to save our youth from prison and death, by challenging state governments to end their prison building policies [reported in *San Francisco Bay View*, 9/22/99, "Baptist convention calls for end to jailing and killing Black youth"]. No matter our religious beliefs, we should laud these goals and support these endeavors. It is a well-established fact, that New Afrikans' relationship with the U.S. government has always been exploitative. The prison industrial complex is the latest effort to reap exorbitant profits from Black youths, because of their confronting the racist criminal justice system. For the Progressive National Baptist Convention to require its 2.5 million members and 2,000 churches take a forward political position on this issue, should serve notice on all religious denominations of the need to aggressively challenge and politically counter state governments and private business prison-building.

However, in order to expect all religious denominations to take an offensive against prison-building, it is important to understand the exploitative relationship that New Afrikan's have with the U.S. government. This understanding permits clerics and preachers to stand before their congregation and preach liberation theology. In respects to preaching a liberation theology, it is important to recognize that New Afrikans' spiritual development is supported by various belief systems/faiths. The New Afrikan Nation comprises Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhist, animists and atheists, all of whom are oppressed, not because of their belief system, but because of their race and class. Many of these individuals are politically conscious, willing and prepared to engage, build and organize toward ending the exploitation of our youth and people. It is these individuals, no matter their personal spiritual belief system, that need to be organized into a united front of unity and struggle. Our position should be, any religion

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or belief system that prohibits its adherents from engaging in the struggle to end exploitation and oppression should be discarded. Thus, it can be held that liberation theology supports the liberation of oppressed peoples from racism and capitalist exploitation.

For many it is understood that revolution is the socio-economic and political evolutionary process of man/woman development from one level of socio-political consciousness to a higher level of consciousness and action. The (r)evolutionary process forges moral determinants that establish a revolutionary culture in opposition to the dominant culture of the oppressor nation, i.e., cultural imperialism. Hence, a new value system and morality is created out of the development of the struggle, establishing a new man and woman – the revolutionary man and woman. In the words of El Hajj Malik Shabazz,

The time we are living in... and... are facing now is not an era where one who is oppressed is looking towards the oppressor to give him some system or form of logic and reason. What is logical to the oppressor isn't logical to the oppressed, and what is reason to the oppressor is not reason the oppressed. The black (New Afrikan) people in this country are beginning to realize that what sounds reasonable to those who exploit us doesn't sound reasonable to us. There just has to be a new system of reason and logic devised by us who are on the bottom, if we want some results in its struggle that is called "Negro Revolution.

It is through the course of (r)evolution we develop our own logic and reason, we forge our revolutionary culture, and establish our liberation theology and belief systems that wholly embrace our struggles and movements. Thereby, our spirituality is expressed in the material reality of our struggle to end racism and exploitation. Any belief system or spirituality that is not manifested in the material world of our existence has no basis to survive the course of our struggle.

With this understanding, we note that liberation theology is to create a fresh theological approach to reflection and praxis, or

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committed involvement in struggle. Yet, it is argued the *genesis* of liberation theology has evolved from the efforts of people wanting to be free of oppression and appealing to God or the divine for intervention of their oppression. Thus, Prophet Moses applied liberation theology when he freed the Hebrews from Egyptian domination. The same can be said of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) when he liberated Mecca from the idolatry of the Arabian clans. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to rediscover and qualify theology as a potential liberation force. This is particularly significant, given that Prophet Jesus sought to restore moral and religious principles at a time when Roman oppression prevailed in his land, castigating the money lender's, prostitutes, fraudulent rabbis and avaricious land owners.

Hence, worship in this context is based on the premise there is a need for liberation – to be liberated from conditions that hinder spiritual growth and evolvment, conditions that deny the basic human quality of life that allows for the spirit of God to reign. Thus, God becomes the liberator, the spirit of God as the liberator is evoked and religion develops the means and method by which the spirit of a liberating God is manifested. There is no one set pattern in which to evoke or manifest the spirit of a liberating God. Rather, people struggling to be liberated must call upon their God in accord to given conditions of their exploitation and oppression and the form of worship they practice.

This theopraxis must become an encompassing practice that creates socio-economic and political determinatives in order to foster a real movement to end exploitation and oppression. But in order to do so, this theopraxis must be responsive to the historical-dialectical and material basis by which oppression derived. The hearing of the word of God anew must turn revelation into revolution; in a sense, liberation theology is the spiritual revelation of revolution.

Liberation theology, Paulo Freire explains in *The Politics of Education*, “demands of its followers a knowledge of socio-political science...(and) since science cannot be neutral this demands an ideological choice.” He further explains that the church must be prophetic in its approach, applying the Exodus story to incarnate the spirit of liberation or the God of liberation. Ideological choice in respects to socio-political science definitely puts theopraxis to task, causing its practitioners to consider how best to manifest materially their spiritual faith and inclinations. As stated in the *Holy Qur'an*, “oppression and tumult is worse

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than slaughter... fight oppression where you may find it." New Afrikan theologian, James H. Cone argues,

The creation of just social order must be grounded in the hopes that have been engendered by the poor as they have emerged from their encounter with God in their fight for freedom. Thus, the reflective visions of the poor as defined by their political struggles and as celebrated in their religious life must be taken seriously... I contend that a just social order must be accountable to not one but many religious visions. If we are going to create a society that is responsive to the humanity of all, then we must now view one religious faith as absolute... Any creation of a just social order must take into account that God has been known and experienced in many different ways. Because we have an imperfect grasp of divine reality, we must not regard our limited vision as absolute. Today such a view must be firmly rejected.

Hence, any theopraxis must (1) be a transformation of the self-identity of the communities that have been crushed by oppression and an affirmation of those communities; (2) be a vision of solidarity among the particular communities; (3) and be the empowerment coming from an enhanced self-image and commitment to solidarity must be translated into goals for political, socio-economic, and united actions.

While the Progressive National Baptist Convention must be applauded and supported for calling for the end of exploitation of our youth, and the end of prison-building in this country, we must continue to be gravely concerned about the method and path this struggle will take. El-Hajj Malik Shabazz, in his famous speech *The Ballot or the Bullet*, advised, "We need to expand the civil-rights struggle to a higher level – to the level of human rights. Whenever you are in a civil-rights struggle, whether you know it or not, you are confining yourself to the jurisdiction of Uncle Sam. No one from the outside world can speak out on your behalf as

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long as your struggle is a civil-rights struggle.” Hence, it is the demand for *human rights* as the basis for developing liberation theology praxis that needs to be borne by the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and must be emulated by other religious denominations. In so doing, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, with its 2,000 churches, would do all New Afrikans a great service if it would call for a united front of all religious denominations to demand a moratorium on prison-building and amnesty for all U.S. political prisoners.