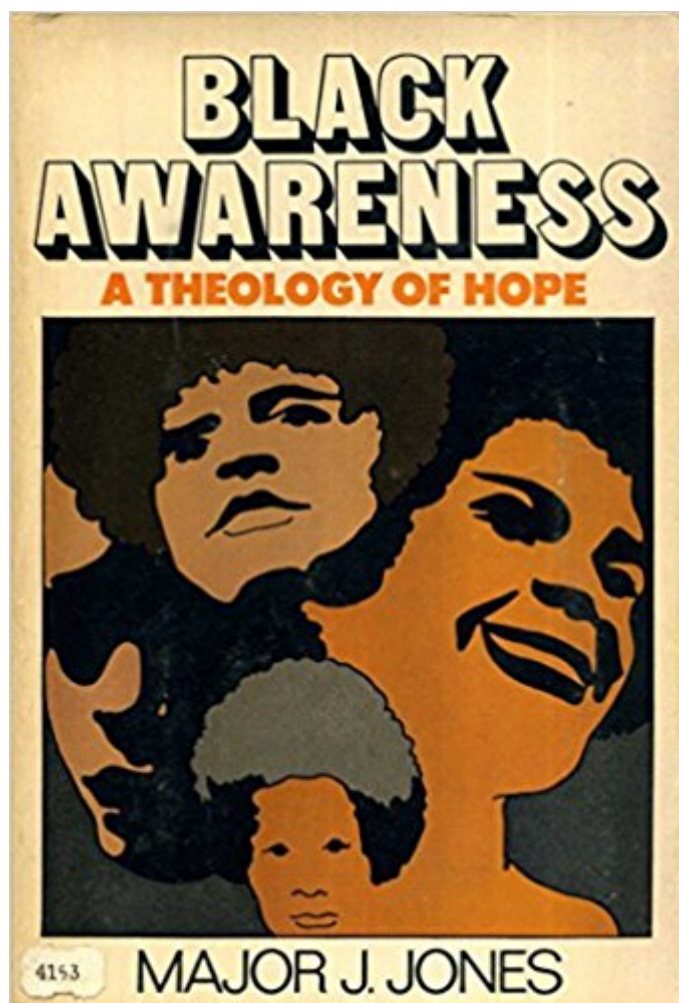




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Black Awareness; A Theology Of Hope



Synopsis

Book by Major J Jones

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Book by Major J Jones

Major Jones (1918-1993) was a United Methodist minister, author, district superintendent of the Tennessee Conference, President of Gammon Theological Seminary, and (after his retirement) an adjunct professor at Clark Atlanta University; he also wrote *Christian Ethics for Black Theology: The Politics of Liberation* and *The Color Of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought*. He wrote in the important first chapter of this 1971 book, "This book is offered as one of the many current expressions of what increasingly is becoming known as 'black theology.' It seeks to explore the revolutionary potential of the Christian ideas of the black man's future against a historical interpretation of the black experience. The primary concern of the book is for the future of the Christian faith; but it seeks to suggest a more viable future for the black man within the context of a pro-white society. No Christian theology of hope can overlook the fact that the Christian faith is wholly oriented to God as the power of the future which arrived in Jesus Christ under the signs of promise and hope for a more feasible future. Indeed, the categories of hope and futurity are at the very core of the Christian faith." (Pg. 11) He continues, "What is most needed today, especially for the black awareness

movement, is a new correlation between the eschatological origins of Christian faith the present revolutionary forces that seek to build a new and better future for the black man. Such a theology cannot be stated in the parlance of the current theology of hope used to express the thoughts of such men as Jurgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Ernst block, and others. Too much of their thought is abstract and not related to what is inherent in the thought-content of the black man's aspiration for the future. This task of theologizing requires an anthropology of hope, one that is oriented to the future of the black man. (Pg. 12) He goes on, "Many white theologians have now begun to ask, 'Why a Black Theology?' while remaining totally unaware of what the growing body of a wide range of black literature in general, and black theology in particular, is attempting to say. The traditional content of systematic theology may well not correspond to that of much of the literature of black theology. Black theology differs from traditional theology by the simple reason that it may not be as concerned to describe such traditional themes as the eternal nature of God's existence as it is to explore the impermanent, paradoxical, and problematic nature of human existence. (Pg. 13) He explains, "black theology, like all theology, arises out of a people's common experience with God. At this moment in history, the black community seeks to express itself theologically from a black frame of reference in language that speaks to the current conditions of a people. Black theology then may well become that truth which places a black person for the first time in touch with a deep core self which is the real; and once a man finds such a core self, he is prepared to give all for it. This is the liberating intent of black theology. Black theology is but an important facet of the total appropriation of the gospel to the current issues of our time. (Pg. 14-15) He concludes the chapter, "Black theology must, above all else, be a theology of hope, it must hold within its content a promise to be redeemed within the earthly life span of those who possess such a hope and who discern such a promise. Under God, it must be a clear gospel message of new light and new self-understanding, in the ultimate, of what it means to live, even in a world of despair. More perhaps than any other, this theology of hope seeks to be a this-world interpretation; and, in this light, it seeks to look at the hope of a people from an internalized black awareness frame of reference. Though it is centered in black awareness, such a hope is under God; it is a hope seen from a black perspective. (Pg. 16-17) He states, "In order to accommodate the dehumanizing process to which the black man was subjected, the white mind has traditionally had to make several basic assumptions. First of all, the white mind had to conclude that the black man was not human, that he had no soul. Second, the white mind had to find adequate theological foundations for such an assumption, so certain passages of Scripture were selected to support

every facet of the dehumanizing process. Third, when it was conceded that the black man did indeed possess a soul, and that he could become a Christian, it was conceded only on the added assumption that he was not equal because of his inferior mentality. Fourth, the black man had to be kept in a subjected servant status, else his substandard economic status could not be assured. Fifth, the black family had to be kept unstable and prevented from crystallizing into a social unit, and especially deprived of a strong black male image; thus this lack of freedom has allowed the dehumanizing process to become a permanent part of the white man's mind-set. (Pg. 23-24) He notes, "when there was not strong argument for the moral rightness of slavery, the ecclesiastical institution loomed higher than moral concern. A large segment of institutional Christianity supported slavery because it was to its advantage to do so; yet, there was always a large segment of the church that never accepted slavery, and had it not been for this segment of people, black and white, the independent moral conscience of the nation would have died. Almost every major religious communion divided over the question of slavery." (Pg. 36) He suggests, "Many have been critical of the black church because of its otherworldly emphasis, but they do not understand that much of the theology of the black church was necessarily of compensatory content of hope, because slavery under the white oppressor completely destroyed the black people's hopes in this world. It is no small wonder that the spirituals, the songs, and the sermons in the black church reflected so much of hope beyond despair. Indeed, all would have despaired had they not been able to sing: 'Soon I Will Be Done with the Trouble of the World.'" (Pg. 41) He points out, "Had the early post-Civil War white church exemplified more than mere passive concern that the newly freed black man suffered discrimination, disenfranchisement, and death by the lynch mobs, it would probably have had more influence even until now. By remaining silent, passive, and inactive, the white church found itself, even after slavery, having to rationalize the lynch mobs and even the Klan. Much of its theology was to become a theology of segregation. By not confronting the evil---racism---as it revealed itself in new forms and in new structures, the post Civil-War white church soon found that the enemy, even if it had conceived it so, had soon grown too strong. Not too much later historically, the white church became a part of the system, fully sharing in its benefit." (Pg. 51-52) Later, he adds, "The white post-Civil War church gave itself to the aid of the dehumanizing process before and after slavery because it too allowed itself to become too much at one with racism." (Pg. 59) He observes, "Never before in the history of the black-white relation in America has the white man felt the full weight of blackness quite so heavy as he is feeling it now. This is because there is a new identity dimension in the black person who is

now asserting himself. Black awareness has become a reality and a new hope within the black community. Black awareness is somewhat analogous to Albert Camus's *The Rebel* who says "no" and "yes." Too many black people are now asserting [with Camus] that it is "better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees." This is what Paul Tillich is saying in his book *The Courage to Be*, where he points out that "the courage to be is the ethical act in which man affirms his being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation." The black man is saying that "I shall affirm my being, that being is black, and that black being must be recognized as an authentic human selfhood." (Pg. 71-72) Later, he adds, "black awareness should make the black man more fit for the whole human context rather than the smaller arena of the black community." (Pg. 77) He points out, "For the average black man in the ghetto, for any theology to be meaningful it must speak to only those factors or actions which are going to help him realize a better day within his lifetime; he would insist that the only time he has is now. In this light, then, there is a very practical reason for the urgent need for a theology of hope that is closely related to revolution." It may be that this is the reason that there is such a cry against the black church, the black college, and many other black institutions---they simply have not found words to articulate what they think of the future. It may well be because "they have not seen hope as a viable possibility without revolutionary actions that are totally alien to their present mode of thought." (Pg. 89-90) He notes, "to a black theologian, what is troubling is that too many Christians conform to the trend of the moment without introducing into it anything specifically Christian" "they too often lack the uniqueness that ought to be more expressive of their religious faith. Thus, theologies, especially the newer expressions, tend too often to become mere mechanical exercises that justify the positions adopted on grounds that are absolutely not Christian." Currently black churchmen and black theologians increasingly are finding it hard to resist offering theological justification for views akin to the black racism current within much of the black community." (Pg. 96) He argues, "There is no suggestion that violence should be the methodology now adopted; it is rather to suggest that the 'black mood' has created a new man which is through with humiliation, and he is seeking rescue through whatever means necessary, even revolution." The basic thesis of this book is that such a "No!" does not have to be violent if it is a collective "No!" and if it comes from the lips of a liberated people who really mean "No!" The hope within the black awareness movement is theological, because it is, as one can conceive it, under God." (Pg. 105-106) He asserts, "in the work of

Albert B. Cleage Jr. | one sees coming to focus a kind of black Christology in the Church of the Black Madonna, wherein is articulated a new interpretation of Jesus. He is seen as a black man, he is a Zealot, and his messiahship is directed to the business of ministering to a black people. His mission is liberation---political, social, economic, and religious | As his book *The Black Messiah* makes plain, black religion is directed at political action, economic pressure, and black control of black communities. Jesus, as the Black Messiah, gives strength and revolutionary ardor to his followers. [The book] leaves much to be desired, if the book is intended to be a proof that Jesus was physically black, but it does cogently speak to the need for social and political action on the part of the black church. (Pg. 112-113) He asks, "One wonders, however, what the altering of God's color will do for the black man. Will it make him, as a mature religious person, any more responsible with the use of his newly acquired black power than the white man was with his white power? Will the black man, with his black God, be a better man than the white man was with his white God?... Indeed, is not the idea of God, no matter what his color, an indispensable prerequisite for man's ethical being?" (Pg. 115-116) He states, "Finally, no gospel of black awareness should ignore the basic tenets of the Judeo-Christian faith. To do so would be merely to establish a folk religion that would not survive the test of history. The gospel must seek always to clarify the issues that are in focus in the struggle, while at the same time adhering to the faith tradition." (Pg. 118) He adds, "The goals of the black awareness movement will fall far short of fulfillment if the movement is not rooted in a God of the future | The image of God's reality and of his future becomes present only where righteousness reigns on earth. The core of his righteousness is justice infused with love." (Pg. 128) He concludes, "there are certain characteristics that have to be related and explained | 1. First of all, black awareness is humanistic in the Ernst Bloch sense of a theology of hope, and yet it is more than mere humanism or naturalism | 2. Second, under the mandate of hope, black awareness literature has a strong sense of messianic mission | 3. Third, black awareness is characterized by the lack of a centralized programmatic thrust | 4. Finally, no black theologian can miss the fact that we move, as if we were indeed under some power of the future | Let this tomorrow, this future day, be nearer the ideal of the Creator of the hope that compels such a dream." (Pg. 135-143) This is one of the foundational texts of Black Theology, and will be a must reading for anyone seriously studying the subject.

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