

Beginnings of a Black Theology and its Social Impact

Black Theology was the stream of African Theology that first developed in America as a layman philosophy. For African Americans, the Bible at that time was the main source of information on Africa. The Psalm 68:31 served as the basis for the construction of an entire ideology of "Ethiopia" with which they meant, Africa. Out of it, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen composed: "May he who hath arisen to plead our cause, and engaged you as volunteers in the service, add to your numbers until the princes shall come from Egypt and Ethiopia stretch out her hand unto God."¹

This entire complex of beliefs and attitudes towards Africa, missions and the Back-to Africa impetus was very much incarnated in the person and work of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner (1834- 1915). In 1851, he joined the Methodist Church where he was later assigned deacon and elder and even, bishop. When Turner heard a speech of Crummell, this marked a turning point in his young life. But he first started a military and political career in the States until appointed chaplain by President Abraham Lincoln and later elected twice into the House of Representatives in Georgia. Here, he and other Blacks were prohibited from taking their seats.²

The ideas of African American missionary work in Africa and the return to this continent as the only way for Blacks to find justice; became Turner's motivating force. He called for reparations for the years of slavery in order to finance the repatriation. He wrote: "We have worked, enriched the country and helped give it a standing among the powers of the earth, and when we are denied our civil and political rights, the fool Negro (...) has no more sense than a jackass (...) Africa is our home and is the one place that offers us manhood and freedom (...) A hundred million of dollars can be obtained if we, as a race, would ask for it (...)"³ For these ambitions, Turner was criticized much, also within his church. He responded wisely: "We were born here, raised here, fought, bled, and died here and have a thousand times more right here than hundreds of thousands of those who help to snub, proscribe and persecute us, and that is one of the reasons I almost despise the land of my birth."⁴ Turner's vision of Blacks returning to Africa resembled much of what is known as "American Dream", today: the possibility of success for all; freedom; civilizing and Christianizing. He helped Afro-Americans develop a new self-worth

¹ Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, "A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793" in *Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* Vol. 1, ed. Herbert Aptheker (USA: Carol Publ. Corp., 1976), 37.38.

² Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (NY: Doubleday, 1972), 169.

³ *Ibid.*, 170. 234.

⁴ William M. Tuttle, Jr., *Race Riot- Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (NY: Atheneum, 1980), 210-217.

identity by revising their false image of God: "We have as much right Biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negro, as (...the) white people have to believe that God is a fine looking, symmetrical and ornamented white man."⁵

In the 1890ies, Turner was able to travel to Africa four times, sent by the AME Council of Bishops. He was warmly received in Freetown/ Sierra Leone, where his arrival increased the number of members when he organized a first Annual Conference in Africa. He went on to Liberia and called another such conference. In Pretoria/ South Africa, Reverend Mangena M. Mokone who had refused to accept the segregation of European and African leaders into different conferences, had founded the "Ethiopian Church",⁶ which was joined to the AME when he came into contact with Turner. Before his final return to the U.S., Turner reported to the Missionary Board the impressive number of 12.000 AME members in Africa. This included the American returnees, the members of Mokone's church as well as the native converts who mostly had joined the churches through the annual conferences, which had been four, in the whole. Turner's motto was to be "with the people, by the people and for the people", and he contributed much to our modern independent African churches. His life work prepared the way for Garvey.

⁵ Edwin S. Redkey, "Bishop Turner's African Dream" in *Black Apostles*, eds. Randall K. Burkett and Richard Newman, (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978), 232.

⁶ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (NY: Doubleday, 1972), 174-176. John White, *Black leadership in America 1895-1968* (London: Longman, 1985), 25.