



The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity  
433 Mendenhall Laboratory  
125 South Oval Mall  
Columbus, OH 43210  
[www.kirwaninstitute.org](http://www.kirwaninstitute.org)

**Review of J. Deotis Roberts', *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).**

**by Marguerite Spencer**

Originally published in 1971, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* represents J. Deotis Roberts' effort to constructively reinterpret the militancy of black theology in light of a theology that better accounts for Christian liberation and reconciliation. In it Roberts argues that Black theologians, as ministers and prophets, can't escape the ethical questions raised by racism, pointing to the true demands of the Christian faith (2-3, 6). Whites who have ignored the demands of love, justice, and mercy and blacks who have passively accepted this are both guilty of malpractice as Christians. A worthy Black Theology, argues Roberts, sets as its goal to lead both blacks and whites to an authentic Christian existence. To achieve reconciliation, whites must move through humanness and blacks through liberation (7).

Roberts begins by examining black theological discourse. He emphasizes being black, even over against what is more common today, being "African American;" and argues that black consciousness is a realistic foundation for the theological task. Latent in Christianity, Black Theology does not surrender the eternal gospel, communicated through scripture, tradition, and the witness of the Spirit, but provides a context through which we understand the faith (3). Much of its raw material is intuitive, as the black church's history is largely oral (4). Roberts rejects the narrowness of Cone, who marks off a little space for operation as black scholars, and who argues that only the oppressed may understand a theology of oppression. (5-6). Instead, he takes reconciliation seriously, call for intercommunication between blacks and whites. White Christians may come to understand and work with blacks for liberation and reconciliation on an interracial basis (7).

Roberts presents liberation and reconciliation as in dialectal balance within the gospel message (xvii). Like Cone, Roberts argues that Black Theology is a theology of liberation and that the Christian faith is revolutionary (8). The exodus is the central category for interpreting the Old Testament, the work of Jesus, and the church. It was an event in which the future opened up to the oppressed when the power of the oppressor was broken (9). The prophets denounced the old social and political structures, revealing that Yahweh would bring about a new era for his people. Roberts argues that "old wine and new wineskins" are at the heart of Black Theology. While old white-controlled power structures contain the

new wine of black self-determination and equality, they cannot withstand this radical change and must be restructured (10). Roberts believes that, in addition to individual relationships, the entire social pattern of racism must be changed (12). This does not make Black Theology anti-white; rather, it is pro-black (19). Just as Christ is liberator, he is also reconciler. Locating Buber's model of otherness in the black-white relationships, Roberts argues that blacks and whites need to see the truth of each other as brothers and sisters, in a free encounter in which one becomes truly human (20).

In addition to asserting the centrality of the exodus, Roberts explores the nuances of identifying blacks as "a chosen people," which requires a careful rereading of the Bible (22). The oppressed often think of themselves as the chosen of God, Roberts asserts, participating in the redemptive suffering of Christ. However, Roberts insists that the interpretation of chosenness must hold up the promise of a better day, lest it confer more meaningless suffering on blacks (23). Instead of being victims, the chosen transmute their suffering into a victory – a "rod in their hands to enter into a redemptive mission among themselves and others (26)." This is not a position of superiority but that of "stewardship" with the "wretched of the earth." Roberts writes, "At the same time that we seek reconciliation through our role as suffering servants, we are to seek liberation from suffering stemming from being black in a white world (27)."

The concept of a chosen people is also important for the group life of blacks. The black church has real possibilities for fulfilling the primary need of familial and social cohesiveness (27). It is a social and religious body that has served as an extended family member, reminding the black people of their own sins and responsibilities and inspiring young blacks to establish stable families (30, 35). In addition to uniting, Roberts urges, the church must use all of its resources to launch a massive assault against white power in the church, community, or state that is responsible for the oppression of blacks (35).

For Roberts God, who indulges in self-disclosure in particular historical and cultural settings, speaks to blacks in the context of their oppressive experiences, promising deliverance and redemption. Revelation is both personal and social, existential and political, the means to a more meaningful existence as well as to a more humanized life (39). It is important for blacks, Roberts states, that they can clearly see the presence of God and the divine activity realizing justice and quality in human affairs (42). Blacks still experience "the problem of God," which presents itself by questioning not whether God exists, but what the moral attributes of God are. Roberts notes that God is the Creator-Spirit who declares all of creation good, calling on the human person to be a co-creator (41). God is also provident and all-powerful, able to promise the vindication of the good and the defeat of evil and injustices (43). Although crucified, God is love – expressing compassion, respect, redemption and reconciliation (44).

Black Theology according to Roberts affirms the dignity of the black person as a human being (51). Drawing upon George Kelsey, he argues that racism is destructive of this dignity. The life of the racist is sinful and self-glorifying – it elevates skin color and the privileges associated with it. To relinquish this life, the self must be “shattered” before it can be renewed (52). The racist of the South may hate blacks only to turn to a real love. The racist of the North, however, does not hate, but is indifferent to blacks (53). Sin, which can take the form of omission, is also collective, as is racism in this society. Can we say that all whites are racist, Roberts asks? Given that racism is so deep-seated on the unconscious level we may indeed (57). Racism can also be preconscious, even among the well-wishing, if whites are not aware of their complicity. To understand the blight of racism upon both blacks and whites Roberts argues that Black Theology must be informed not only by the Christian faith, but by explorations of the unconscious (e.g., Freud); of social, economic and political ills (e.g., Marx); and existentialism which lifts up human freedom and duty to decide (e.g., Tillich) (54-55). Christian realism recognizes that both blacks and whites are sinners. Sin involves broken relationships with God and humanity, as well as a misuse of God-given freedom (56). Sin is a type of human bondage to our uncontrollable passions, pride, self-centeredness and hate, Roberts argues (58). But the individual can begin to see others as brother as well as initiate reforms, reparations, restitution, and empowerment (57). This requires repentance, Roberts claims, which requires in turn a change of mind and intention. The problem is that whites find it difficult to repent and blacks find it difficult to forgive. As Roberts states blacks and whites need to collectively repent and forgive to heal the brokenness. They do this by cooperating with God in their spiritual growth, accepting divine grace, and receiving the comfort, guidance and strength of the Holy Spirit (61-62, 64). Anxious whites might need a psychoanalyst, Roberts claims, whereas oppressed blacks can rely on the healing ministry of the black church (64).

The encounter with the black Messiah as Liberator and Reconciler in the black church and community is the central source of strength for blacks, Roberts argues (68). He does not call the Messiah black in a literal historical way, as does Albert Cleage, but rather in a symbolic and mythical one. The slave master’s Americanized, white Christ is inadequate for blacks who affirm their dignity as children of God (71). Rather, blacks can experience a salvific encounter with self and God through a loving Christ visualized as black (72). This does not foster separatism, Roberts insists. Just as Christ is particularized for black Christians, the black Messiah is at the same time universalized in the good news centered on the cross and resurrection (73). Blacks do, however, bear an existential cross from birth that whites are freer to take up at will (76). The resurrection, then, is the basis of black hope to make all things new on a personal as well as collective and political levels. Roberts argues further that the three offices of Christ have real meaning for a Black Theology of liberation and reconciliation). As prophet, the black Messiah is spokesman for God condemning wrongdoings whether among whites or blacks. As priest, the black

messiah heals, speaking to oppressed blacks and their oppressors. And as king, the black Messiah reigns over a realm of moral and spiritual ends (77-78). The black Messiah is also the Liberator of blacks and the Reconciler of humans to God and each other (81).

Roberts concludes with a discussion of the eschaton, which for blacks is both present and future, dignity and destiny, cross and resurrection (83). Overemphasis of the present leads to an emptiness and to despair, a position Roberts criticizes Cone for taking. Quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, he believes that our present life is “a political situation” subject to the tension between “reach” and “grasp.” One can be inspired to live like one ought, but one really lives and acts in the context of what is (90). Whether white or black, those who experience forgiveness and sanctification in Christ, and who are led by the Spirit into a life of social concern and action can be heirs of the kingdom of God (91).

Reading Roberts for the first time is a challenge. His prose is somewhat stilted, but his ideas are rich and well-woven. The anger so present in Cone manifests itself in Roberts in a muted yet equally powerful way. Sometimes those who speak softly are better heard. By focusing on malpracticing Christians, both black and white, and by examining racism and the inability to forgive racists as sins, Roberts shows his disdain for the economic, political, and social structures of the day. Moving from the sin of racism to liberation, repentance, reconciliation, and resurrection, Roberts calls both blacks and whites to participate in a restructuring of these forces. From my reading of Cone, I do not see the two as rivals – rather they mirror the healthy and necessary tension between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. It would be worthwhile to read more of Roberts.

### **Substantive Questions for Discussion:**

1. How does Cone respond to Roberts?
2. Roberts argues that whites who have ignored the demands of love, justice, and mercy and blacks who have passively accepted this are both guilty of malpractice as Christians. Discuss this in the context of how Roberts employs “sin” in chapter 5, pp. 55-59.
3. Roberts rejects the narrowness of Cone, who marks off a little space for operation as black scholars, and who argues that only the oppressed may understand a theology of oppression. (5-6). Instead, he takes reconciliation seriously, call for intercommunication between blacks and whites. Can both Cone and Roberts be right?
4. Can blacks self-designate as a “chosen people” without further balkanizing race relations?

5. Roberts draws attention to structural racism when he argues that “old wine and new wineskins” are at the heart of Black Theology. While old white-controlled power structures contain the new wine of black self-determination and equality, they cannot withstand this radical change and must be restructured (10). Roberts believes that, in addition to individual relationships, the entire social pattern of racism must be changed. How does one go about this restructuring? Do blacks and whites play different roles? What role does Black Theology play? The Black Church? White Christianity?