



**JARAMOGI, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CHURCH:  
BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND STRUGGLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

In an age of established-order funding of faith, the shameless transformation of social gospel teaching into preaching and praying for wealth, and an increased self-silencing and passivity of many religious institutions in the face of evil, injustice, war, suffering and savage oppression in the world, the re-reading and reflection on the Black liberation theologies of the Sixties offer a radical and refreshing alternative understanding of the role of faith communities in struggles for social change and good in the world. Such a Black liberation theology is that of Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman, (Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Jr.) (1911-2000), Founder and First Patriarch of the Shrines of the Black Madonna of the Pan-African Orthodox Church, whose centennial birth and coming-into-being we mark this year and month.

Like his peers, Jaramogi (a title meaning Courageous One) is both a producer and product of the history of the 1960s. Rightfully reading the times, he recognizes the revolutionary potential of the historical moment, declaring that “We are in the midst of gigantic social upheaval and the continuation of American society as it now exists is an impossibility.” Indeed, he reasoned, “a rebellion is going on” and “a whole new world is being born.” Given the sacred mission of the liberation struggle in its dedication to human freedom and justice in the world, “By the yardstick of that struggle all things must be judged, evaluated, maintained or discarded.”

But he knows that like all revolutions and initiatives for radical social change, the first battle is for the hearts and minds of the people. This battle he defines as struggles to teach truth, erase religious and social myths, free the mind and spirit, and restore Christianity to its early radical roots as taught by Jesus,

whom he describes as the Black Messiah and a revolutionary leader.

Jaramogi argues Black people must also be freed from fantasies of integration, what we call now post-racial illusions. He defines these fantasies as escapist and based on the erroneous assumption that the oppressor will accept each of us “as an individual of superior merit, even if he won’t accept other Black people.” Such a failure to see the indivisibility of Black freedom and justice means that one accepts the White supremacist “declaration of Black inferiority,” which “is basic to all American life” and permeates its institutions. Liberation, then, requires a spiritually and ethically grounded philosophy of life, supportive of the Black liberation struggle, in a word, a Black liberation theology. For he says, “A people cannot seriously engage in liberation struggle until they develop a revolutionary theology.”

A Black liberation theology, Jaramogi teaches, will answer questions of how the Divine works in the world, the real message and meaning of Jesus and the relevance of God, Church and religion to the struggle to end suffering and oppression and open the way to liberation and a worthy life. This, in turn, means Black people must “find authority in their own experience,” especially as it is shaped in struggle, and “reject all authority which does not support the Black Liberation struggle.” For “eventually every revolution must repudiate the authority of the rules established by the dominant power group,” as well as its self-affirming and faulty reasoning.

Jaramogi asserts that such a liberation theology calls for a liberation church, as distinct from the old church embedded in enslavement teachings and beliefs. It is a church that will aid in building “a Black liberation movement which derives its basic religious insights from African spirituality, its character

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from African communalism and its revolutionary direction from Jesus, the Black Messiah.” Indeed, “an emerging new revolutionary Black church will bring Black Brothers and Sisters together in one joyous experience of worship, commitment, unity and struggle” for a new world.

Here Jaramogi makes a critical distinction between “the gospel of individual salvation” and “the gospel of collective liberation” for all. For “the liberation of all Black people is salvation for each of us,” he states. Thus, he says, “In struggling for the liberation of the Black Nation, we submerge our individualism and struggle together to realize the will of God for all Black people in our everyday lives right here on earth.” Indeed, “We would make this earth a heaven in which Black people can live with dignity, a world in which we are not ashamed to die and leave our children.”

Jaramogi placed great emphasis on African and human agency, arguing that if we are created equal, “it is up to us to secure and maintain an equal status.” Black people, he taught, must dare to “to dream of living together with love and dignity and desire this kind of world for themselves and their children,” and seek power to achieve it. For “power is not received as a free gift from heaven. If you want it you must take it” in righteous and relentless struggle.

He reminds us that the struggle is on every level, personal, communal and institutional. For he states, “When we fight for Black liberation, we fight to destroy White supremacy. We have no choice.” And “we must either destroy it or accept Black inferiority” as both a concept and condition. Also, he asserts, that for the practice and achievement of Black li-

beration, “We must develop a new value system.” Moreover, “Our values must be derived from the Black experience as that experience has been shaped by our continuing struggle for liberation and survival.”

Although his call for a new value system envisions numerous specific liberating values, Jaramogi embraces the *Nguzo Saba*, the Seven Principles of Kawaida and Kwanzaa in his defining seven basic program areas of his church’s work and struggle “in its attack on oppressive White institutions and in its building of Black counter institutions.” These principles he translates in terms of programmatic emphasis specific to his institution. They are “*Umoja* (Unity)—Community Organization and Action; *Kujichagulia* (Self-determination)—Political Education and Action; *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility)—Development of Medical and Social Service Institutions; *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics)—Common Development and Consumer Organization; *Kuumba* (Creativity)—Cultural Development; *Nia* (Purpose)—Research and Training, and; *Imani* (Faith)—Communication.”

Jaramogi’s teachings of self-authorizing agency, self-determination, liberation as a total freeing of body, mind and spirit, and the pursuit of social justice as central to the mission and meaning of the religious institution, find current and continuing relevance in confronting the critical issues of our time. Indeed, his liberation teachings and those of similar Black liberation theologies and ethics, point us towards a history of righteous struggle too sacred to surrender and a tradition of social justice teaching too vital and valuable to let die.

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Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org).