Book Roundtable

Can a Dead Black Theology Be Resurrected as a Pentecostal Theology? A Review Essay of *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology*

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Alistair Kee has given much attention in his academic career to the intersection of ideology, religion and culture, particularly as it relates to liberation theology. This now retired professor of the philosophy of religion at the University of Edinburgh most recently turned his deconstructionist gaze upon black theology — a political theology in its American, British and South African contexts. One wonders though if his book — *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* — was a lost letter to a dying friend who had long since been dead and buried? Kee writes about a book of essays done in honor of James Cone’s landmark work *Black Theology and Black Power*. Those essays, Kee notes, never engaged the subject: “(1) Many of the essays simply ignore *Black Theology and Black Power* . . . (2) Many of the essays have been previously published ‘in another form’. They ignore the work of James Cone in favour of the author’s favorite research topic” (*RDBT* 191). But this is exactly what Kee did when he wrote the essay, “‘The Criticism of [Black] Theology is Transformed into the Criticism of Politics’ — Karl Marx,” for *The Quest for Liberation and Reconciliation: Essays in Honor of*

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1 Alistair Kee, *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate. 2006). All references to this book will be made parenthetically in the text as *RDBT* followed by page number.
J. Deotis Roberts. After writing that as “Philosopher, theologian, scholar of religions, Deotis Roberts is a citizen of one country and a welcome visitor to many others,” Kee proceeded to offer in summary form the critique he launches with a tour de force in the book under review here, begging the question: did it ever have to be written?

Kee’s primary point in that essay, and stated in protracted fashion again in this book is that black theology must change or die, if it is not dead already. The problem with black theology, according to Kee, is that, “Far from exhibiting a new flourishing of creativity, commitment and imagination, it has been content to repeat the mantras of a previous period” (RDBT vii). However, even those mantras, in the socio-historical context in which they emerged, are brought under attack by Kee. Interestingly for Kee — a white man — the biggest drawback of black theology is its preference, even dependency, on race as a category over against his preferred class/Marxist analysis.

For Kee, there is a need to reject romanticized notions of black life, or its past (wherever). Kee also sees a need to critique even nationalistic movements for black people that are deemed incompatible with Christianity. At the same time, there must be a critical engagement prior to rejection or radical reformulation of Christian materials, biblical, theological or liturgical. Finally, one needs to engage in thoroughgoing socio-economic analysis in order to not remain trapped in erroneously essentialized notions of race or gender or merely pay lip service to class analysis. Hence Marxism is a necessary component of any relevant political theology. This all sounds great. The problem is that Kee’s entire book reads like a satire against straw man examples of black theology’s failure to do just that, rather than a constructive proposal of and engagement with black theology to speak on behalf of the black poor.

The book opens with Kee’s analysis of the emergence of racial consciousness among persons of African descent in their diasporic contexts, arguing that particularly those of the Francophone Caribbean and parts of Francophone Africa are much more radical in their racial consciousness than African Americans. The crucial components that appear for Kee among these Francophone black intellectuals is that they: 1) do not romanticize blackness or a supposed African past; 2) they reject forced segregation or integration with whites, but

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3 Alister Kee, “‘The Criticism of [Black] Theology is Transformed into the Criticism of Politics’ — Karl Marx,” in Michael Battle, ed., The Quest for Liberation and Reconciliation (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), 46-52; the bracketed word in the title of Kee’s essay belongs to him.