

which arises out of the white experience. Questions like “How do we find meaning and purpose in a world in which God is absent?” are questions of an affluent society. Whites may wonder how to find purpose in their lives, but our purpose is forced upon us. We do not want to know how we can get along without God, but how we can survive in a world permeated with white racism.

## God Is Black

Because blacks have come to know themselves as *black*, and because that blackness is the cause of their own love of themselves and hatred of whiteness, the blackness of God is the key to their knowledge of God. The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of the black theology doctrine of God. There is no place in black theology for a colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color. The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience, or God is a God of racism.

As Camus has pointed out, authentic identification

[Is not] a question of psychological identification—a mere subterfuge by which the individual imagines that it is he himself who is being offended.... [It is] identification of one’s destiny with that of others and a choice of sides.<sup>3</sup>

Because God has made the goal of blacks God’s own goal, black theology believes that it is not only appropriate but necessary to begin the doctrine of God with an insistence on God’s blackness.

The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God’s own condition. This is the essence of the biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering. It is not that God feels sorry and takes pity on them (the condescending attitude of those racists who need their guilt assuaged for getting fat on the starvation of others); quite the contrary, God’s election of Israel and incarnation in Christ reveal that the *liberation* of the oppressed is a part of the innermost nature of God. Liberation is not an afterthought, but the essence of divine activity.

The blackness of God means that the essence of the nature of God is to be found in the concept of liberation. Taking seriously the Trinitarian view of the Godhead, black theology says that as Creator, God identified with oppressed Israel, participating in the bringing into being of this people; as Redeemer, God became the Oppressed One in order that all may be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit, God continues the work of liberation. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Creator and the Redeemer at work in the forces of human liberation in our society today. In America, the Holy Spirit is black persons making decisions about their togetherness, which means making preparation for an encounter with whites.

It is the black theology emphasis on the blackness of God that distinguishes it sharply from contemporary white views of God. White religionists are not capable of perceiving the blackness of God, because their satanic whiteness is a denial of the very essence of divinity. That is why whites are finding and will continue to find the black experience a disturbing reality.

White theologians would prefer to do theology without reference to color, but this only reveals how deeply racism is embedded in the thought forms of their culture. To be sure, they would *probably* concede that the concept of liberation is essential to the biblical view of God. But it is still impossible for them to translate the biblical emphasis on liberation to the black-white struggle today. Invariably they quibble on this issue, moving from side to side, always pointing out the dangers of extremism on both sides. (In the black community, we call this “shuffling.”) They really cannot make a decision, because it has already been made for them.

How scholars would analyze God and blacks was decided when black slaves were brought to this land, while churchmen sang “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.” Their attitude today is no different from that of the bishop of London who assured slaveholders that

Christianity, and the embracing of the Gospel, does not make the least Alteration in Civil property, or in any Duties which belong to Civil Relations; but in all these Respects, it continues Persons just in the same State as it found them. The Freedom which Christianity gives, is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the dominion of Man’s Lust and Passions and inordinate Desires; but as to their outward Condition, whatever that was before, whether bond or free, their being baptized and becoming Christians, makes no matter of change in it.<sup>4</sup>

Of course white theologians today have a “better” way of putting it, but what difference does that make? It means the same thing to blacks. “Sure,” as the so-called radicals would say, “God is concerned about blacks.” And then they would go on to talk about God and secularization or some other white problem unrelated to the emancipation of blacks. This style is a contemporary white way of saying that “Christianity ... does not make the least alteration in civil property.”

In contrast to this racist view of God, black theology proclaims God’s blackness. Those who want to know who God is and what God is doing must know who black persons are and what they are doing. This does not mean lending a helping hand to the poor and unfortunate blacks of society. It does not mean joining the war on poverty! Such acts are sin offerings that represent a white way of assuring themselves that they are basically “good” persons. Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with them, and participating in the goal of liberation. *We must become black with God!*

It is to be expected that whites will have some difficulty with the idea of “becoming *black* with God.” The experience is not

only alien to their existence as they know it to be, it appears to be an impossibility. “How can whites become black?” they ask. This question always amuses me because they do not really want to lose their precious white identity, as if it were worth saving. They know, as everyone in this country knows, blacks are those who say they are black, regardless of skin color. In the literal sense a black person is anyone who has “even one drop of black blood in his or her veins.”

But “becoming black with God” means more than just saying “I am black,” if it involves that at all. The question “How can white persons become black?” is analogous to the Philippian jailer’s question to Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” The implication is that if we work hard enough at it, we can reach the goal. But the misunderstanding here is the failure to see that blackness or salvation (the two are synonymous) is the work of God, not a human work. It is not something we accomplish; it is a gift. That is why Paul and Silas said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”

To *believe* is to receive the gift and utterly to reorient one’s existence on the basis of the gift. The gift is so unlike what humans expect that when it is offered and accepted, we become completely new creatures. This is what the Wholly Otherness of God means. God comes to us in God’s blackness, which is wholly unlike whiteness. To receive God’s revelation is to become black with God by joining God in the work of liberation.

Even some blacks will find this view of God hard to handle. Having been enslaved by the God of white racism so long, they will have difficulty believing that God is identified with their struggle for freedom. Becoming one of God’s disciples means rejecting whiteness and accepting themselves as they are in all their physical blackness. This is what the Christian view of God means for blacks.

## The Love and Righteousness of God

The theological statement “God is love” is the most widely accepted assertion regarding the nature of God. All theologians would agree that it is impossible to speak of the Christian understanding of God without affirming the idea of love as essential to the divine nature. Anders Nygren’s *Agape and Eros*<sup>5</sup> is the classic treatment of the subject, and he shows, perhaps conclusively, that *agape* is inseparable from the authentic Christian view of God. When religionists deviated from the *agape* motif, the result was always a distortion of the authentic Christian conception of God.

Though religionists have agreed that love is indispensable to the Christian view of God’s nature, there has been much disagreement on how the idea of the *wrath* of God is reconciled with the love of God.

Marcion was one of the first to face this problem head-on. According to him, it is impossible to reconcile the Old Testament idea of the righteous God with the New Testament idea of the God of love.<sup>6</sup> The concept of law (*nomos*) is a complete denial of love (*agape*). Marcion’s solution was to insist that the gospel of Christ is completely new and thus has nothing to do with the concept of righteousness (including wrath) as presented in the Old Testament. This led him to posit two Gods, the Creator God of the Old Testament who stressed obedience to the law of righteousness, and the Redeemer God of the New Testament who is the “good” God, the God of love. Interpreting Marcion’s view, Nygren writes:

The message of Christ is marked by the spontaneous love and mercy of the Highest God, shown to strangers, unmotivated and uncalculated. In the Old Testament, on the other hand, man’s relation to God is dominated by the idea of retribution, of reward and punishment.<sup>7</sup>

It was to be expected that the church would reject Marcion’s view: the early Christian community did not understand its existence as being completely new in the sense of negating the God of the Old Testament. The early Christians believed that they were the authentic continuation of the old Israel, not its denial. Jesus, therefore, did not destroy the Old Testament; he fulfilled it.

Although the church rejected Marcion’s sharp dichotomy between the Old Testament view of God’s righteousness and the New Testament view of God’s love in Jesus Christ, there is still much confusion about the precise relationship between the two “symbols”<sup>8</sup> when applied to God’s nature. The most common procedure is to emphasize God’s love as the dominant motif of Christianity and then interpret God’s righteousness in the light of it. But this approach fails to take seriously the concept of God’s righteousness and tends to make God’s love mere sentimentality. By emphasizing the love of God to the exclusion of a meaningful encounter with God’s righteousness, we could argue that the approach is basically Marcionite, except that Marcion was more honest. Marcion claimed that the idea of righteousness is *basic* to the Old Testament view of God, and he was right in this. He further suggested that the idea of love as revealed in Christ is a negation of the Old Testament view of righteousness, and he was wrong in this.

Most religionists, although rejecting the Marcion dichotomy, proceed to analyze the concept of the love of God without relating it to God’s righteousness. Marcion’s position presents us with two alternatives. Either we agree with him and his view of the two Gods, Righteousness and Love, or we affirm the basic oneness of God’s righteousness and love, and that means that God’s love is inexplicable without equal emphasis on God’s righteousness and vice versa. Contemporary theology seems to want to have its cake and eat it too—that is, reject the Marcionite view and also accept a view of love that ignores righteousness, and that is not possible.

Gordon Kaufmann’s work, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, seems to be open to this criticism. Particularly concerned about protecting the idea of love in God’s nature, Kaufmann says that it is improper to speak of the “wrath” of God as an expression of the being of God. Love is essential, but the idea of wrath is an expression of human disobedience and can be