

God in Black Theology

The reality of God is presupposed in black theology. Black theology is an attempt to analyze the nature of that reality, asking what we can say about the nature of God in view of God's self-disclosure in biblical history and the oppressed condition of black Americans.

If we take the question seriously, it becomes evident that there is no simple answer to it. To speak of God and God's participation in the liberation of the oppressed of the land is a risky venture in any society. But if the society is racist and also uses God-language as an instrument to further the cause of human humiliation, then the task of authentic theological speech is even more dangerous and difficult.

It is *dangerous* because the true prophet of the gospel of God must become both "anti-Christian" and "unpatriotic." It is impossible to confront a racist society, with the meaning of human existence grounded in commitment to the divine, without at the same time challenging the very existence of the national structure and all its institutions, especially the established churches. All national institutions represent the interests of society as a whole. We live in a nation which is committed to the perpetuation of white supremacy, and it will try to exterminate all who fail to support this ideal. The genocide of the Amerindian is evidence of that fact. Black theology represents that community of blacks who refuse to cooperate in the exaltation of whiteness and the degradation of blackness. It proclaims the reality of the biblical God who is actively destroying everything that is against the manifestation of black human dignity.

Because whiteness by its very nature is against blackness, the black prophet is a prophet of national doom. He proclaims the end of the "American Way," for God has stirred the soul of the black community, and now that community will stop at nothing to claim the freedom that is three hundred and fifty years overdue. The black prophet is a rebel with a cause, the cause of over twenty-five million American blacks and all oppressed persons everywhere. It is God's cause because God has chosen the blacks as God's own people. And God has chosen them not for redemptive suffering but for freedom. Blacks are not elected to be Yahweh's suffering people. Rather we are elected because we are oppressed against our will and God's, and God has decided to make our liberation God's own undertaking. We are elected to be free now to do the work for which we were called into being—namely, the breaking of chains. Black theologians must assume the dangerous responsibility of articulating the revolutionary mood of the black community. This means that their speech about God, in the authentic prophetic tradition, will always move on the brink of treason and heresy in an oppressive society.

The task of authentic theological speech is *difficult* because all religionists in society claim to be for God and thus for humankind. Even executioners are for God. They carry out punitive acts against certain segments of society because "decent" citizens need protection against undesirables. That is why blacks were enslaved and Amerindians exterminated—in the name of God and freedom. That is why today blacks are forced into ghettos and shot down like dogs if they raise a hand in protest.

When George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and other "great" Americans can invoke the name of God at the same time that they are shaping society for whites only, then black theology knows it cannot approach the God-question too casually. It must ask, "How can we speak of God without being associated with oppressors?" White racism is so pervasive that oppressors can destroy the revolutionary mood among the oppressed by introducing a complacent white God into the black community, thereby quelling the spirit of freedom.

Therefore if blacks want to break their chains, they must recognize the need for going all the way if liberation is to be a reality. The white God will point to heavenly bliss as a means of detouring blacks away from earthly rage. Freedom comes when we realize that it is against our interests, as a self-determining black community, to point out the "good" elements in an oppressive structure. *There are no assets to slavery!* Every segment of society participates in black oppression. To accept the white God, to see good in evil, is to lose sight of the goal of the revolution—the destruction of everything "masterly" in society. "All or nothing" is the only possible attitude for the black community.

Must We Discard God-Language?

Realizing that it is very easy to be co-opted by the enemy and the enemy's God-language, it is tempting to discard all references to God and seek to describe a way of living in the world that could not possibly be associated with "Christian" murderers. Some existentialist writers—Camus and Sartre—have taken this course, and many black revolutionaries find this procedure appealing. Reacting to the ungodly behavior of white churches and the timid, Uncle Tom approach of black churches, many black militants have no time for God and the deadly prattle about loving your enemies and turning the other cheek. Christianity, they argue, participates in the enslavement of black Americans. Therefore an emancipation from white oppression means also liberation from the ungodly influences of white religion.

This approach is certainly understandable, and the merits of the argument warrant a serious investigation. As black theologians seeking to analyze the meaning of black liberation, we cannot ignore this approach. Indeed, it is quite intellectually tempting. Nevertheless two observations are in order at this juncture.

(1) Black theology affirms that there is nothing special about the English word "God" in itself. What is important is the dimension of reality to which it points. The word "God" is a symbol that opens

up depths of reality in the world. If the symbol loses its power to point to the meaning of black liberation, then we must destroy it. Black theology asks whether the word "God" has lost its liberating power. Must we say that as a meaningful symbol the word "God" is hopelessly dead and cannot be resurrected?

Certainly black theology realizes that, when a society performs ungodly acts against the poor in the name of God, there may come a time when the oppressed might have to renounce all claims to that kind of "faith" in God in order to affirm authentic faith in God. Sometimes because of the very nature of oppressed existence, the oppressed must define their being by negating everything oppressors affirm, including belief in the God of oppressors. The oppressed must demonstrate that all communications are cut off. In Camus's words:

There is, in fact, nothing in common between a master and a slave; it is impossible to speak and communicate with a person who has been reduced to servitude.¹

Oppressed and oppressors cannot possibly mean the same thing when they speak of God. The God of the oppressed is a God of revolution who breaks the chains of slavery. The oppressors' God is a God of slavery and must be destroyed along with the oppressors. The question then, as black theology sees it, is not whether blacks believe in God, but whose God?

(2) In response to those inclined to discard God-language, black theology also believes that the destiny of blacks is inseparable from the religious dimensions inherent in the black community. Theologically, one way of describing this reality is to call it general revelation. This means that all human beings have a sense of the presence of God, a feeling of awe, and it is precisely this experience that makes them creatures who always rebel against domestication. The black community is thus a religious community, a community that views its liberation as the work of the divine.

It is important to note that every significant black liberation movement has had its religious dimensions. Black liberation as a movement began with the pre-Civil War black churches which recognized that Christian freedom grounded in Jesus Christ was inseparable from civil freedom. That is why black preachers were the leaders in the struggle for the abolition of slavery, and why southern slave owners refused to allow the establishment of independent black churches in the south. It is true, however, that the post-Civil War black church lost its emphasis on civil freedom and began to identify Christianity with moral purity. But this does not mean that religion is irrelevant altogether; it only means that religion unrelated to black liberation is irrelevant.

To try to separate black liberation from black religion is a mistake, because black religion is authentic only when it is identified with the struggle for black freedom. The influence of Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammed, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., demonstrates the role of religion in the black community.

It is not the task of black theology to remove the influence of the divine in the black community. Its task is to interpret the divine element in the forces and achievements of black liberation. Black theology must retain God-language despite its perils, because the black community perceives its identity in terms of divine presence. Black theology cannot create new symbols independent of the black community and expect blacks to respond. It must stay in the black community and get down to the real issues at hand ("cutting throats," to use LeRoi Jones's phrase) and not waste too much time discussing the legitimacy of religious language.

The legitimacy of any language, religious or otherwise, is determined by its usefulness in the struggle for liberation. That the God-language of white religion has been used to create a docile spirit among blacks so that whites could aggressively attack them is beyond question. But that does not mean that we cannot kill the white God, so that the presence of the black God can become known in the black-white encounter. The white God is an idol created by racists, and we blacks must perform the iconoclastic task of smashing false images.

Hermeneutical Principle for the Doctrine of God

Every doctrine of God is based on a particular theological methodology. For instance, Karl Barth's theological point of departure is the word of God as revealed in the man Jesus. We know who God is, according to Barth, because we know who Christ is. To look for the knowledge of God elsewhere than in Christ is to look in the wrong place, and thus end up constructing images which reflect human pride rather than divine revelation. "The knowledge of God occurs in the fulfillment of the revelation of His Word by the Holy Spirit."²

Paul Tillich, on the other hand, does not share Barth's kerygmatic emphasis. His theological methodology is a "method of correlation," in which he seeks to relate the changeless gospel to changing cultural situations. Culture, according to Tillich, is indispensable for God-talk.

Relying heavily on existential philosophy and its analysis of the human condition (a condition best described by the word "estrangement"), Tillich describes God as being-itself, which provides the only answer to human estrangement from self and neighbor. Because being-itself is free from the threat of nonbeing or nothingness, it is the source of human courage—the ability to affirm being in spite of the presence of nonbeing. Therefore "God" is a symbolic word pointing to the dimension of reality which is the answer to the human condition.

Inasmuch as the perspective of black theology differs from those of both Barth and Tillich, there is also a difference in its approach to the doctrine of God. The point of departure of black theology is the biblical God as related to the black liberation struggle. It asks, "How do we *dare* speak of God in a suffering world, a world in which blacks are humiliated because they are black?" This question, which occupies the central place in our theological perspective, forces us to say nothing about God that does not participate in the emancipation of black humanity. God-talk is not Christian-talk unless it is *directly* related to the liberation of the oppressed. Any other talk is at best an intellectual hobby, and at worst blasphemy.

There are, then, two hermeneutical principles which are operative in the black theology analysis of the doctrine of God.

(1) The Christian understanding of God arises from the biblical view of revelation, a revelation of God that takes place in the liberation of oppressed Israel and is completed in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ. This means that whatever is said about the nature of God and God's being-in-the-world must be based on the biblical account of God's revelatory activity. We are not free to say anything we please about God. Although scripture is not the only source that helps us to recognize divine activity in the world, it cannot be ignored if we intend to speak of the Holy One of Israel.

(2) The doctrine of God in black theology must be of the God who is participating in the liberation of the oppressed of the land. This hermeneutical principle arises out of the first. Because God has been revealed in the history of oppressed Israel and decisively in the Oppressed One, Jesus Christ, it is impossible to say anything about God without seeing God as being involved in the contemporary liberation of all oppressed peoples. The God in black theology is the God of and for the oppressed, the God who comes into view in their liberation. Any other approach is a denial of biblical revelation.

New Wine in New Wineskins

Because black theology is the theology of black liberation, it must break with traditional theological speech when that speech softens the drive for black self-determination. It cannot run the risk of putting "new wine into old wineskins" (Mark 2:22). When Jesus used the phrase, he was referring to the kingdom of God and its relationship to the conventional Judaism of his time.

When black theologians analyze the doctrine of God, seeking to relate it to the emerging black revolution in America, they must be especially careful not to put this new wine (the revelation of God as expressed in black power) into old wineskins (white folk-religion). The black theology view of God must be sharply distinguished from white distortions of God. This does not mean that black theology rejects white theology entirely. Unfortunately, this cannot be done,

for oppression always means that the communication skills of an oppressed community are determined to a large degree by the oppressors. That is precisely the meaning of oppression! Because black theologians are trained in white seminaries, and white thinkers make decisions about the structure and scope of theology, it is not possible for black religionists to separate themselves immediately and completely from white thought.

When Jesus spoke of the gospel as new wine, it did not mean a total rejection of Judaism. What he meant was that the revolutionary message could not be restricted to the possibilities available in the old structure.

Similarly, because our knowledge of Christianity came from white oppressors, the black theology view of God is in part dependent on white theologians, but this does not mean white theologians set the criteria for black theology. Liberation means that the oppressed must define the structure and scope of reality for themselves; they do not take their cues from oppressors. If there is one brutal fact that the centuries of white oppression have taught blacks, it is that whites are incapable of making any valid judgment about human existence. The goal of black theology is the destruction of *everything* white, so that blacks can be liberated from alien gods.

The God of black liberation will not be confused with a blood-thirsty white idol. Black theology must show that the black God has nothing to do with the God worshiped in white churches whose primary purpose is to sanctify the racism of whites and to daub the wounds of blacks. Putting new wine in new wineskins means that the black theology view of God has nothing in common with those who prayed for an American victory in Vietnam or who pray for a "cool" summer in the ghetto.

The refusal of black theology to put new wine in old wineskins also means that it will show that the God of the black community cannot be confused with the God of white seminaries. With their intellectual expertise, it is inevitable that white scholars fall into the racist error of believing that they have the right to define what is and what is not orthodox religious talk. Because they have read so many of their own books and heard themselves talk so often, it is not surprising that they actually believe most of the garbage they

spout out about God. They therefore think that all authentic God-talk must meet their approval before it can be called theology. Black theology rejects their standards, for we know they speak for oppressors, and thus will inevitably analyze the nature of God in the interests of white society as a whole.

Black theology must also be suspicious of so-called white revolutionary theologians. What is most disturbing about their self-proclaimed identification with black power is their inability to let blacks speak for ourselves. They still insist on defining what black power is, and not only in private conversations but also in print. And to make it worse, they invariably miss the whole point of black power. They should know by now that, in view of white brutality against blacks and church participation in it, no white person who is halfway sensitive to black self-determination should have the audacity to speak for blacks. That is the problem! *Too many whites think they know how we feel about them.* If whites were really serious about their radicalism in regard to the black revolution and its theological implications in America, they would keep silent and take instructions from blacks. Only blacks can speak about God in relationship to their liberation. And those who wish to join us in this divine work must be willing to lose their white identity—indeed, to destroy it.

Black theology also rejects any identification with the "death of God" theology. The death-of-God question is a white issue 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.³

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 force 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.⁴

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*⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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"⁸ 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 God, Righteousness and Love, or we affirm the basic oneness of God, 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 understood only by looking at human nature, not God's nature:

The wrath of God is a symbol more appropriate to discussion of the nature (and plight) of *man* than God. . . . The man hanging on the cross . . . reveals God's nature as long-suffering love, not vengeance or wrath in any sense. . . . Hence, in our direct exposition of the doctrine of God such symbols as "wrath" would only be misleading and should be avoided: God reveals himself as love and faithfulness, and this it is that we must seek to grasp here.⁹

Black theology agrees that the idea of love is indispensable to the Christian view of God. The exodus, the call of Israel into being as the people of the covenant, the gift of the promised land, the rise of prophecy, the second exodus, and above all the incarnation reveal God's self-giving love to oppressed humanity.

We do not read far in the biblical tradition without recognizing that the divine-human fellowship is to be understood exclusively in terms of what God does for humankind and not what humankind does for itself or for God. That is why Nygren is correct in describing God's *agape* as the "initiation of the fellowship with God,"¹⁰ and why it is appropriate for Barth to emphasize the complete free-

dom of God in the divine-human encounter. If the incarnation means anything in Christian theology, it must mean that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The love of God is the heart of the Christian gospel. As the writer of I John puts it, "God is love" (4:8, 16). Commenting on the theological implications of this phrase, C. H. Dodd writes:

To say "God is love" implies that *all* His activity is loving activity. If He creates, He creates in love; if He rules, He rules in love; if He judges, He judges in love. All that He does is the expression of His nature which is—to love.¹¹

Black theology, then, asks not whether love is an essential element of the Christian interpretation of God, but whether the love of God itself can be properly understood without focusing equally on the biblical view of God's righteousness. Is it possible to understand what God's love means for the oppressed without making *wrath* an essential ingredient of that love? What could love possibly mean in a racist society except the righteous condemnation of everything racist? Most theological treatments of God's love fail to place the proper emphasis on God's wrath, suggesting that love is completely self-giving without any demand for obedience. Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace":

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God.¹²

The difficulty with Kaufmann's view and others like his is not so much his explicit statements but their false implications. By removing wrath as a symbol of the nature of God, his interpretation weakens the central biblical truth about God's liberation of the oppressed from oppressors. A God without wrath does not plan to do too much liberating, for the two concepts belong together. A God minus wrath seems to be a God who is basically not against

anything. All we have to do is behave nicely, and everything will work out all right.

Such a view of God leaves us in doubt about God's role in the black-white struggle. Blacks want to know whose side God is on and what kind of decision God is making about the black revolution. We will not accept a God who is on everybody's side—which means that God loves everybody in spite of who they are, and is working (through the acceptable channels of society, of course) to reconcile all persons to the Godhead.

Black theology cannot accept a view of God which does not represent God as being for oppressed blacks and thus against white oppressors. Living in a world of white oppressors, blacks have no time for a neutral God. The brutalities are too great and the pain too severe, and this means we must know where God is and what God is doing in the revolution. There is no use for a God who loves white oppressors *the same as* oppressed blacks. We have had too much of white love, the love that tells blacks to turn the other cheek and go the second mile. What we need is the divine love as expressed in black power, which is the power of blacks to destroy their oppressors, here and now, by any means at their disposal. Unless God is participating in this holy activity, we must reject God's love.

The interpretation of God's love without righteousness also suggests that white "success" is a sign of God's favor, of God's love. Kaufmann's view is open to the ungodly assumption that all is well with the way whites live in the world, because God loves them, and their material success is the evidence. But according to black theology, it is blasphemy to say that God loves white oppressors unless that love is interpreted as God's wrathful activity against them and everything that whiteness stands for in American society. If the wrath of God is God's almighty no to the yes of human beings, then blacks want to know where the no of God is today in white America. We believe that the black community's no as expressed in the black revolution is God's no, showing God's rejection of oppressors and acceptance of the oppressed.

Kaufmann's view also suggests that there is knowledge of God as God is *in se*. Theologically this seems impossible. We can know

God only in relationship to the human race, or more particularly to God's liberating activity in behalf of oppressed humanity. The attempt to analyze God independently of God's liberating work is analogous to the theological attempt to understand human nature *before* the fall. The fall itself renders such knowledge impossible: there is no way to get behind the human condition as we know it to be.

The limitation of human knowledge is equally true in regard to God as God is *in se*. We are not permitted to transcend our finiteness and rise to a vision of God unrelated to the human condition. If this is true, what merit is there in saying that God's wrath is not a part of the divine nature? If God is a God of the oppressed of the land, as the revelation of Christ discloses, then wrath is an indispensable element for describing the scope and meaning of God's liberation of the oppressed. The wrath of God is the love of God in regard to the forces opposed to liberation of the oppressed.

Love without righteousness is unacceptable to blacks: this view of God is a product of the minds of enslavers. By emphasizing the complete self-giving of God in Christ, without seeing also the content of righteousness, oppressors could then demand that the oppressed do likewise. If God freely enters into self-donation, then in order to be godlike we must give ourselves to our oppressors in like manner. If God has loved us in spite of our revolt against God, then to be like God we too must love those who revolt against or enslave us. For blacks this would mean letting whites crowd us into ghettos where rats and filth eat away at our being, and not raising a hand against them.

This view of love places no obligation on white oppressors. The existing laws of society protect them, and their white skins are badges of acceptance. In fact, they are permitted to do whatever they will against blacks, assured that God loves them as well as the ones they oppress. Love means that God will accept white oppressors, and blacks will not seek reprisal.

Black theology rejects this view, saying that those who oppress others are in no position to define what love is. How could white scholars know that love means turning the other cheek? They have

never had to do so. Only those who live in an oppressed condition can know what their love-response ought to be to their oppressor. Their oppressors certainly cannot answer that question for them!

This means that all white intellectual disputation about black and God is a religious lie. If oppressors themselves, who claim to be followers of the love-ethic, would actually practice what they preach, then the oppressed condition would no longer exist. There is something demonic about whites who have the protection of the state but advise blacks to go the second mile for them. They have not moved even an inch for blacks: how can they claim to be speaking from a common perspective called Christianity?

It takes a special kind of reasoning to conclude that God's love means that God is no respecter of persons in a society filled with hate, where some think they have the right to define the course of human history for all. Ungodly in their very relationship to blacks, they want to tell us what God's love means. There is only one explanation for this attitude. They are white and can think only in white thought-patterns, even in reference to God. How else do we explain that the white theological view of God's love invariably complements or shores up outrageous socio-political structures that want blacks to be complacent and obedient to white enemies? Can they really expect blacks to take them seriously?

The oppressor's view of God's love is rejected by black theologians because they represent a people that shares Frantz Fanon's feelings about the world:

All the native has seen in his country is that they can freely arrest him, beat him, starve him: and no professor of ethics, no priest has ever come to be beaten in his place, nor to share their bread with him. As far as the native is concerned, morality is very concrete; it is to silence the settler's defiance, to break his flaunting violence—in a word, to put him out of the picture.¹³

Black theology will accept only a love of God which participates in the destruction of the white oppressor. With Fanon, black

theology takes literally Jesus' statement, "the last will be first, and the first last." Black power "is the putting into practice of this sentence."¹⁴

Blacks cannot adhere to a view of God that will weaken their drive for liberation. This means that in a racist society, we must insist that God's love and God's righteousness are two ways of talking about the same reality. Righteousness means that God is addressing the black condition; love means that God is doing so in the interests of both blacks and whites. The blackness of God points to the righteousness of God, as well as to the love of God.

Paul Tillich, in another connection, has placed a similar emphasis. Though he refuses to say that wrath is a part of God's being, it is to his credit that he has insisted that divine love and justice should not be separated:

Justice is that side of love which affirms the independent right to object and subject within the love relation. [Because love is the reunion of the estranged, it] does not destroy the freedom of the beloved and does not violate the structures of the beloved's individual and social existence.¹⁵

This means that justice is the structure necessary for the human expression of human freedom. To be God, God must protect both the freedom and the structure of human behavior. That is why Tillich rejects sentimental misinterpretations of love as emotion, which suggest that there is a conflict between divine love and its relationship to power and justice. The three are inseparable, according to Tillich:

It must be emphasized that it is not divine power as such which is thought to be in conflict with the divine love. The divine power is the power of being-itself, and being-itself is actual in the divine life whose nature is love. A conflict can be imagined only in relation to the creature who violates the structure of justice and so violates love itself. When this happens . . . judgment and condemnation follow. . . .

Condemnation then is not the negation of love but the negation of the negation of love.¹⁶

What, then, can we conclude about the meaning of God's love in a racist society? Using blackness as the point of departure, black theology believes that God's love of humankind is revealed in God's willingness to become black. God's love is incomprehensible apart from blackness. This means that to love blacks God takes on black oppressed existence, becoming one of us. God is black because God loves us; and God loves us because we are black.

Righteousness is that side of God's love which expresses itself through black liberation. God makes black what humans have made white. Righteousness is that aspect of God's love which prevents it from being equated with sentimentality. Love is a refusal to accept whiteness. To love is to make a decision against white racism. Because love means that God meets our needs, God's love for white oppressors could only mean wrath—that is, a destruction of their whiteness and a creation of blackness.

For black theology love cannot be discussed in the abstract. It must be concrete because black suffering is concrete. Black suffering is whites making decisions about our place in the world, telling us what we can or cannot do in society. Love must be brought down to this level, the reality of white inhumanity against the black community. As Fanon says, "no phraseology can be a substitute for reality."¹⁷ That is why black theology says that God's love is God's liberation of blacks as expressed in black power.

Traditional Theological Language and the Black God

One of the major tasks of black theology is that of making sense out of the traditional theological talk about God. It asks, in regard to every theological assertion, "What are its implications for the oppressed?" Or, more specifically, "Does it have any meaning in the struggle for black liberation in America?" Believing that the biblical God is made known through the liberation of the oppressed, the

black theology analysis of God begins with an emphasis on God's blackness.

But now we must ask, How is the concept of the blackness of God related to such traditional divine symbols as creator, transcendence, immanence, and providence?

1. *God as Creator.* The biblical view of God as creator is expressed in the priestly assertion, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). To speak of God as creator means that the world and everything that is is because of the creative will of God. In traditional theological language, God as creator expresses aseity—that is, the total independence of God from creation. God is self-existent, meaning that the source of God's existence is found in God.

In order to emphasize the absolute sovereignty of God over creation, traditional theology introduced the idea of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). The purpose is to deny that God used an eternal substance (as in Plato) in the creation of the universe. The existence of an eternal substance would compromise the complete lordship of God over creation. God is fully free, Being without limitations.

Black theology is not interested in debating the philosophical and theological merits of God's aseity except as it can be related to the earthly emancipation of the oppressed. What has the idea of God's self-existence to do with the existence of the oppressed? First it is necessary to point out that the biblical view of God as creator is not a paleontological statement about the nature and origin of the universe, but a theological assertion about God and God's relationship to the oppressed of the land.

It is important to remember that the priestly narrative was put together during the Babylonian exile as an attempt to make theological sense of the history of Israel as an oppressed people. Therefore, it is impossible to remain faithful to the biblical viewpoint without seeing the doctrine of creation as a statement about God and the oppressed of the land. God as creator means that humankind is a creature; the source of its meaning and purpose in the world is not found in oppressors but in God. This view of God undoubtedly

accounts for the exclusivism of Israel in a situation of political oppression.

Though white theologians have emphasized that God as creator is a statement about the divine-human relationship, they have not pointed out the political implications of this theological truth for blacks. God as creator has not been related to the oppressed in society. If creation "involves a bringing into existence of something that did not exist before,"¹⁸ then to say God is creator means that *my being* finds its source in God. *I am black because God is black!* God as creator is the ground of my blackness (being), the point of reference for meaning and purpose in the universe.

If God, not whiteness, is the ground of my being, then God is the only source of reference regarding how I should behave in the world. Complete obedience is owed only to God, and every alien loyalty must be rejected. Therefore, as a black person living in a white world that defines human existence according to white inhumanity, I cannot relax and pretend that all is well with black humanity. Rather it is incumbent upon me by the freedom granted by the creator to deny whiteness and affirm blackness as the essence of God.

That is why it is necessary to speak of the black revolution rather than reformation. The idea of reformation suggests that there is still something "good" in the system itself, which needs only to be cleaned up a bit. This is a false perception of reality. The system is based on whiteness, and what is necessary is a replacement of whiteness with blackness. God as creator means that oppressed humanity is free to revolutionize society, assured that acts of liberation are the work of God.

2. *Immanence and Transcendence of God.* The immanence of God means that God always encounters us in a situation of historical liberation. That is why Christianity is called a historical religion. God is not a symbol referring to the interior religious experiences of humankind. Nor is God to be thought of in the manner of the deist philosophers, who pictured God as performing the initial act of creation but refraining from any further involvement in the world. According to biblical religion, God is involved in the concrete affairs

of human history, liberating the oppressed. Therefore to ask, "Who is God?" is to focus on what God is doing; and to look at what God is doing is to center on human events as they pertain to the liberation of suffering humanity.

God, then, is not that pious feeling in our hearts, nor is God a being "out there" or "up there." It is not possible to speak of the reality of the divine in scientific categories. Like the symbol transcendence, immanence is not a causal term. It refers to the depths of liberation in human society, affirming that God is never less than our experience of liberation.

The immanence of God is the infinite expressing itself in the finite. It is God becoming concrete in finite human existence. We are able to speak of the divine because the divine is revealed in the concreteness of this world. The immanence of God forces us to look for God in the world and to make decisions about the Ultimate in terms of present historical reality. We cannot postpone our decision about God or condition it in terms of a future reality. The finality of God is God's involvement in human now-experiences. For blacks this means that God has taken on blackness, has moved into the black liberation struggle.

Though black theology stresses the immanence of God, it does not deny the reality of God's transcendence. The transcendence of God prevents us from deifying our own experiences, which results in pantheism. God is neither nature nor our highest aspirations. God is always more than our experience of God. This means that truth is not limited to human capabilities. It is this reality that frees the rebel to give all for the liberation struggle without having to worry about the Western concept of winning.

When blacks say that "all is in God's hand," this should not be equated with the trite expression "We should do nothing." It should be taken to mean that blacks are now free to be for the black community, to make decisions about their existence in the world without an undue preoccupation with white ideas about "odds" (we have all the guns) or victory (you cannot win). Ultimately (and this is what God's transcendence means) black humanity is not dependent on our power to win. Despite the empirical odds, our involvement

in our liberation is not pointless; it is not absurd. It refers to the depth and meaning of our being-in-the-world.

It is interesting that, although white "Christians" say they adhere to the meaning of Jesus Christ's existence in the world, they are especially concerned about "winning." The military budget of this country is evidence of this fact. When confronted with the uncompromising demands of the black community, they quickly remind us that they have all the guns, as if that fact itself is supposed to make blacks "stay in their place." Being "Christian," they should know that Jesus was crucified because he did not "stay in his place."

In fact, that is what authentic Christian existence is all about, *the refusal to stay in one's place*. Of course, this may mean physical death, but death is beside the point when one knows that there is a depth to existence that transcends death. The death and resurrection of Christ were an expression of God's transcendence—that is, human beings do not have to live on the basis of mere physical existence. They are free to transcend it, free to encounter the presence of the infinite, which transcends physical reality. This is why blacks do not have to cling to physical life as if it were the ultimate.

Like immanence, transcendence is not a spatial concept. God is not "above" or "beyond" the world. Rather transcendence refers to human purpose as defined by the infinite in the struggle for liberation. For blacks this means that their humanity is not defined by sociological reports and scientific studies. There is a transcendent value in blackness that makes us all human and to which blacks must appeal as ultimate. Human dignity transcends human calculation.

Whites try to tell blacks what is "best" for them in scientific terms—as if blackness were subject to white measurements. But to the surprise of whites, blacks reject their definitions, because blacks know that they are not "things" to be computerized and limited according to white predeterminations. We are *free*, free to defy the oppressor's laws of human behavior, because we have encountered the concreteness of the divine in our liberation, which has revealed to us the transcendence of our cause beyond all human definitions.

The tension between the transcendence and immanence of God is what Paul Tillich calls the risk of faith. To speak of God is to speak, on the one hand, of the presence of the infinite in the finite concrete world. On the other hand, the infinite can never be reduced to the finite. Though the infinite is not equated with finite existence, yet because human beings can encounter the infinite only in their finiteness, they must speak of the finite as if it were the ultimate. Tillich calls this "the infinite tension between the absoluteness of its claim and the relativity of its life."¹⁹

Relating this to black humanity, black theology interprets it to mean that our struggle for liberation is the infinite participating in the concrete reality of human existence. But because God is always more than our experience of God, the reality of God cannot be limited to a particular human experience. However, just because God is more than our encounter of the divine in a particular moment of liberation, this should not be interpreted to mean that we must qualify our assertions about God. Just the opposite. Because God is not less than our experience of the divine, we must speak with an absoluteness that does not compromise with evil, despite the relativity of our claims.

3. *Providence*. It is difficult to talk about divine providence when men and women are dying and children are tortured. Richard Rubenstein pointed out the dangers of this concept in his excellent book *After Auschwitz*.²⁰ Whether or not we agree with his conclusion about the death of God, we can appreciate his analysis, based as it is on his identification with an oppressed people. Like black theology, Rubenstein refuses to affirm any view of God which contributes to the oppression of the Jewish people. If God is the Lord of history, directing the course of events toward a final goal, and if the Jews are God's elected people, then there is no way to avoid divine responsibility for the death of six million Jews in Germany, according to Rubenstein. Therefore, rather than accept a view of God that incorporates Jewish blood in the divine plan, he concludes that God is dead. The argument is cogent and certainly advances the death-of-God theology beyond white Christian views

as represented in the thinking of William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer.

Rubenstein was not the first to recognize the difficulty of reconciling human suffering and divine participation in history. Without focusing on the God of history, the writer of Job recognized this problem. In more recent writing Albert Camus and the existentialists have dealt with it also. In the thinking of Camus, if God is omnipotent and permits human suffering, then God is a murderer. That is why he quotes Bakunin with approval: "If God did exist, we would have to abolish Him."

Traditional Christian theology somehow fails to take this problem seriously. Although agreeing that human suffering is a reality which appears to conflict with God's love, theologians still insist on quoting Paul with approval: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Emil Brunner's view of divine providence is perhaps representative. He begins by distinguishing between God as creator and God's providential care of the world. Avoiding both pantheism and deism, he writes:

There is an existence which is not that of God, but is a creaturely existence, one therefore which is distinguished from the existence of God. Without a certain independent existence the creature cannot stand over against God, and if it does not do so, then it is not a creature as contrasted with the Creator. Even if we do not speak of a *creatio continua* we imply that even now God does not cease to create an existence distinct from His own, a manner of existence which is different from His. If this be so, then there is also an activity of God in and on this existence which is distinct from himself, in and on the world He has created, which is not the activity of the Creator, but of the Preserver, the Ruler.²¹

After distinguishing providence from God's activity as creator, Brunner proceeds to define the meaning of divine providence. Prov-

idence, he says, means that "all that is, and all that happens, takes place within the knowledge and the will of God." There is nothing that happens that does not fit into God's ultimate plan:

All that happens is connected with the divine Purpose; all is ordered in accordance with, and in subordination to, the divine plan and the final divine purpose.²²

If providence means what Brunner says, it is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid the conclusion that all human suffering is in accordance with the divine plan. This would mean that the death of six million Jews, the genocide of Amerindians, the enslavement and lynching of blacks, and every other inhumanity, happened "within the knowledge and will of God." Only oppressors can make such a claim.

Of course, my opponents could reply that this view of providence does not mean that God *wills* human suffering. It simply means that God permits it in order to protect human freedom. It means further that, although there is oppression in this world, God does not let humankind have the last word about human existence, but translates human evil into the divine purpose. Quoting Paul with approval, Brunner says, "I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). The believer looks beyond suffering to the final goal which it must serve; compared with that promised glory, suffering does not count. Suffering becomes the way to eternal life. No human suffering is overlooked by God, and thus providence means that it is redeemable. Thus "the real solution to the problem of theodicy is redemption."²³

Despite the emphasis on future redemption in present suffering, black theology cannot accept any view of God that even *indirectly* places divine approval on human suffering. The death and resurrection of Jesus does not mean that God promises us a future reality in order that we might tolerate present evil. The suffering that Jesus accepted and which is promised to his disciples is not to be equated with the easy acceptance of human injustice inflicted by

white oppressors. God cannot be the God of blacks *and* will their suffering. To be elected by God does not mean freely accepting the evils of oppressors. The suffering which is inseparable from the gospel is that style of existence that arises from a decision to *be* in spite of nonbeing. It is that type of suffering that is inseparable from freedom, the freedom that affirms black liberation despite the white powers of evil. It is suffering in the struggle for liberation.

Providence, then, is not a statement about the future. It does not mean that all things will work out for the best for those who love God. Providence is a statement about present reality—the reality of the liberation of the oppressed. For blacks it is a statement about the reality of blackness and what it means in the liberation struggle against whites. As Tillich says:

Faith in providence is faith “in spite of”—in spite of the . . . meaninglessness of existence. . . . [Special providence] gives the individual the certainty that under any circumstances, under any set of conditions, the divine “factor” is active and that therefore the road to his ultimate fulfillment is open.²⁴

Black theology interprets this to mean that in spite of whiteness a way is open to blackness, and we do not have to accept white definitions.

It is within this context that divine omnipotence should be interpreted. Omnipotence does not refer to God’s absolute power to accomplish what God wants. As John Macquarrie says, omnipotence is “the power to let something stand out from nothing and to be.”²⁵ Translating this idea into the black experience, God’s omnipotence is the power to let blacks stand out from whiteness and to be. It is what happens when blacks make ready for the black-white encounter with the full determination that they shall have their freedom or else. In this situation, divine providence is seeing divine reality in the present reality of black liberation—no more, no less.

CHAPTER 5

The Human Being in Black Theology

Although Christian theology is essentially God-talk, we must not forget who it is that speaks of God. Human finiteness means that we cannot transcend human existence even when we speak of the transcendent God. We know who God is, not because we can move beyond our finiteness but because the transcendent God has become immanent in our history, transforming human events into divine events of liberation. It is the *divine* involvement in historical events of liberation that makes theology God-centered; but because God participates in the historical liberation of humanity, we can speak of God only in relationship to human history. In this sense, theology is anthropology.

In order to clarify the black perspective on theological anthropology, it will be useful to compare it with certain examples of American theology and of existential philosophy.

American Theology, Existentialism, and Black Theology

The weakness of most “Christian” approaches to anthropology stems from a preoccupation with (and distortion of) the God-problem, leaving concrete, oppressed human beings unrecognized and degraded. This is evident, for instance, in fundamentalist and orthodox theologies when they view the infallibility of the Bible as the sole ground of religious authority and fail to ask about the rel-