

CHAPTER FOUR

GOD IS THE COLOR OF SUFFERING

James H. Cone

Professor James Cone is the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City and author of numerous articles and books, including A Black Theology of Liberation; The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation; Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare; and God of the Oppressed. Having lectured at more than seven hundred colleges, universities, divinity schools, and community organizations, he holds seven honorary degrees. Professor Cone explores the implications of the black experience for his view of God, underlining the way in which the history of our communities can shape the way in which we all picture God.

God is not dead, nor is he an indifferent onlooker at what is going on in this world. One day He will make requisition for blood; He will call the oppressors to account. Justice may sleep, but it never dies. The individual, race, or nation which does wrong, which sets at defiance God's great law, especially God's great law of love, of brotherhood, will be sure, sooner or later, to pay the penalty. We reap as we sow. With what measure we mete, it will be measured to us again.²²

This 1902 statement by Francis Grimke, an ex-slave and Princeton Theological Seminary graduate, is an apt summary of the major themes of justice, hope, and love in African American religion from slavery to the present. These themes were created out of the African slaves' encounter with biblical religion (via the white missionaries and preachers) as they sought to make meaning in a strange world. To make meaning in any world is difficult because human beings, like other animals, are creatures of nature and history. We can never become all that we might hope to be, but to be slaves in a foreign land without the cultural and religious support of a loving family and a caring community profoundly limits human possibilities. Because Africans were prevented from freely practicing their native religion, they merged their knowledge of their cultural past with the white man's Christian religion. From these two sources, Africans created for themselves a world of meaning that enabled them to survive 244 years of slavery and 100 years of segregation—augmented by a reign of white terror that lynched more than five thousand black people.

The black religious themes of justice, hope, and love are the product of black people's search for meaning in a white society that did not acknowledge their humanity. The most prominent theme in this trinity of divine virtues is the justice of God. Faith in God's righteousness is the starting point of black religion. African Americans have always believed in the living presence of the God who establishes the right by punishing the wicked and liberating their victims from oppression. Everyone will be rewarded and punished according to his or her deeds, and no one—absolutely no one—can escape the judgment of God, who alone is the sovereign of the universe. Evil-doers may get by for a time, and good people may suffer unjustly under oppression, but “sooner or later, . . . we reap as we sow.”

The “sooner” referred to contemporary, historically observable events: punishment of the oppressors and liberation of the oppressed.

The “later” referred to the divine establishment of justice in the “next world,” where God “gwineter rain down fire” on the wicked and where the liberated righteous will “walk in Jerusalem just like John.” In the religion of African slaves, God's justice was identical with the punishment of the oppressors; divine liberation was synonymous with the deliverance of the oppressed from the bondage of slavery—if not “now,” then in the “not yet.” Because whites continued to prosper materially as they increased their victimization of African Americans, black religion spoke more often of the “later” than the “sooner.”

The theme of justice is closely related to the idea of hope. The God who establishes the right and puts down the wrong is the sole basis of the hope that the suffering of the victims will be eliminated. Although African slaves used the term *heaven* to describe their experience of hope, its primary meaning for them must not be reduced to the pie-in-the-sky, otherworldly affirmation that often characterized white evangelical Protestantism. The idea of heaven was the means by which slaves affirmed their humanity in a world that did not recognize them as human beings. It was their way of saying that they were made for freedom and not for slavery. So their songs included this one:

Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!
 Oh Freedom, I love thee!
 And before I'll be a slave,
 I'll be buried in my grave,
 And go home to my Lord and be free.

Black slaves' hope was based on their faith in God's promise to “protect the needy” and to “defend the poor.” Just as God delivered the Hebrew children from Egyptian bondage and raised Jesus from the dead, so God will also deliver African slaves from American slavery

and "in due time" will bestow upon them the gift of eternal life. That was why they sang:

Soon-a-will be done with the trouble of this world;
 Soon-a-will be done with the trouble of this world;
 Going home to live with God.

Black slaves' faith in the coming justice of God was the chief reason they could hold themselves together in servitude and sometimes fight back, even though the odds were against them.

The ideas of justice and hope should be seen in relation to the important theme of love. Theologically God's love is prior to the other themes. But in order to separate love in the context of black religion from a similar theme in white religion, it is important to emphasize that love in black religion is usually linked with God's justice and hope. God's love is made known through divine righteousness, liberating the poor for a new future.

God's creation of all persons in the divine image bestows sacredness upon human beings and thus makes them the children of God. To violate any person's dignity is to transgress God's great law of love. We must love the neighbor because God has first loved us. And because slavery and segregation are blatant denials of the dignity of the human person, divine justice means God will call the oppressors to account.

Despite the strength of black faith, belief in God's coming justice and liberation was not easy for African slaves and their descendants. Their continued suffering created the most serious challenge to their faith. If God is good, why did God permit millions of blacks to be stolen from Africa, perish in the Middle Passage, and be enslaved in a strange land? No black person has been able to escape the existential agony of that question.

In their attempt to resolve the theological dilemma that slavery and segregation created, African Americans in the nineteenth century

turned to two texts: Exodus and Psalm 68:31. They derived from the Exodus text the belief that God is the liberator of the oppressed. They interpreted Psalm 68:31 as an obscure reference to God's promise to redeem Africa: "Princes shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God." Despite African Americans' reflections on these texts, the contradictions remained between their sociopolitical oppression and their religious faith.

Throughout the twentieth century African Americans continued their struggle to reconcile their faith in the justice and love of God with the persistence of black suffering in the land of their birth. Writer James Baldwin expressed the feelings of most African Americans: "If [God's] love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?"²³ It was Martin Luther King, Jr., a twenty-six-year-old Baptist preacher, who confronted the evil of white supremacy and condemned it as the greatest moral evil in American society. He organized a movement that broke the backbone of legal segregation in the South. From the beginning of his role as the leader of the year-long Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott (1955–56) to his tragic death in Memphis, Tennessee (April 4, 1968), Martin King was a public embodiment of the ideas of love, justice, and hope. The meaning of each was dependent on the others. Though love may be placed appropriately at the center of King's faith, he interpreted it in the light of justice for the poor, liberation for all, and the certain hope that God has not left this world in the hands of evil men.

Martin King took the American democratic tradition of freedom and combined it with the biblical tradition of liberation and justice as found in the Exodus and the prophets. Then he integrated both traditions with the New Testament idea of love and hope as disclosed in Jesus' cross and resurrection. From these three sources, King developed a radical practice of nonviolence that was effective

in challenging all Americans to create the beloved community in which all persons are equal. While it was Gandhi's method of non-violence that provided the strategy for achieving justice, it was, as King said, "through the influence of the Negro Church" that "the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle."²⁴

As a Christian whose faith was derived from the cross of Jesus, Martin King believed that there could be no true liberation without suffering. Through nonviolent suffering, he contended, blacks would not only liberate themselves from the necessity of bitterness and feeling of inferiority toward whites, but would also prick the conscience of whites and liberate them from a feeling of superiority. The mutual liberation of blacks and whites lays the foundation for both to work together toward the creation of an entirely new world.

In accordance with this theological vision, King initially rejected black power because of its connotations of revenge, hate, and violence. He believed that no beloved community of blacks and whites could be created out of bitterness. Only love, which he equated with nonviolence, can create justice. When black power militants turned away from nonviolence and openly preached self-defense and violence, King said that he would continue to preach nonviolence even if he became its only advocate.

He took a similar position regarding the war in Vietnam. In the tradition of the Hebrew prophets and against the advice of his closest associates in black and white communities, King stood before a capacity crowd at Riverside Church on April 4, 1967, and condemned America as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."²⁵ He proclaimed God's judgment against America and insisted that God would break the backbone of U.S. power if this nation did not bring justice to the poor and peace to the world.

During the crises of 1967-68, King turned to his own religious heritage for strength to keep on fighting for justice and for the courage to face the certain possibility of his own death. "It doesn't

matter with me now," King proclaimed in a sermon the night before his assassination, "because I've been to the mountaintop ... and I've seen the Promised Land."²⁶ It was the eschatological hope, derived from his slave grandparents and mediated through the black church, that sustained him in the midst of the trials and tribulations in the black freedom struggle. He combined the justice and love themes in the prophets and the cross with the message of hope in the resurrection of Jesus. Hope for King was based on his belief in the righteousness of God as defined by his reading of the Bible through the eyes of his slave foreparents. The result was one the most powerful faith responses to the theodicy question in African American history.

Centuries ago Jeremiah raised the question, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician?" He raised it because he saw the good people suffering so often and the evil people prospering. Centuries later our slave foreparents came along and they too saw the injustice of life and had nothing to look forward to, morning after morning, but the rawhide whip of the overseer, long rows of cotton and the sizzling heat; but they did an amazing thing. They looked back across the centuries, and they took Jeremiah's question mark and straightened it into an exclamation point. And they could sing, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul."²⁷

From the time of its origin in slavery to the present, black religion has been faced with the question of whether to advocate integration into American society or separation from it. The majority of the participants in the black churches and the civil rights movement have promoted integration; they have interpreted justice, hope, and love in the light of the goal of creating a society in which black and whites can live together in a beloved community.

While integrationists emphasized the American side of the identity of African Americans, black nationalists rejected any association with the U.S. and instead turned toward Africa. Nationalists contended that blacks will never be accepted as equals in a white racist church and society. Black freedom can be achieved only by blacks separating themselves from whites—either by returning to Africa or by forcing the U.S. government to set aside a separate territory in the U.S. so that blacks can build their own society.

The nationalist perspective on the black struggle for justice is deeply embedded in the history of black religion. Some of its proponents include Martin Delaney, often called the founder of black nationalism; Marcus Garvey, the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association; and Malcolm X of the religion of Islam. Black nationalism was centered on blackness and saw no value in white culture and religion.

The most persuasive interpreter of black nationalism during the 1960s was Malcolm X, who proclaimed a challenging critique of Martin King's philosophy of integration, nonviolence, and love. Malcolm advocated black unity instead of the beloved community, self-defense in lieu of nonviolence, and self-love in place of turning the other cheek to whites.

Malcolm X rejected Christianity as the white man's religion. Initially, he became a convert to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and later to the worldwide Islamic community. His critique of Christianity and American society as white was so persuasive that many blacks followed him into the religion of Islam, and others accepted his criticisms even though they did not become Muslims. Malcolm pushed civil rights leaders to the left and caused many black Christians to reevaluate their interpretation of Christianity.

Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze upon a blonde-haired, blue-eyed

Jesus! We're worshipping a Jesus that doesn't even *look* like us! Now just think of this. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed white man has taught you and me to worship a *white* Jesus, and to shout and sing and pray to this God that's *his* God, the white man's God. The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we *die*, to wait until *death*, for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we're dead, while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars right here on this earth!²⁸

During the first half of the 1960s, Martin King's interpretation of justice as equality with whites, liberation as integration, and love as nonviolence dominated the thinking of the black religious community. However, after the riot in Watts (Los Angeles, August 1965) some black religious activists began to take another look at Malcolm X's philosophy, especially in regard to his criticisms of Christianity and American society. Malcolm X's contention that America was a nightmare and not a dream began to ring true to many black clergy as they watched their communities go up in flames.

The rise of black power in 1966 created a decisive turning point in black religion. Black power forced black clergy to raise the theological question about the relationship between black faith and white religion. Although blacks have always recognized the ethical heresy of white Christians ("Everybody talking about heaven ain't going there"), they have not always extended their race critique to Euro-American theology. With its accent on the cultural heritage of Africa and political liberation "by any means necessary," black power shook black religious leaders out of their theological complacency.

Separating themselves from Martin King's absolute commitment to nonviolence, a small group of black clergy, mostly from the North, addressed black power positively and critically. Like King and unlike black power advocates, black clergy were determined to

remain within the Christian community. This was their dilemma: How could they reconcile Christianity and black power, Martin King and Malcolm X?

Under the influence of Malcolm X and the political philosophy of black power, many black theologians began to advocate the necessity for the development of a black theology. They rejected the dominant theologies of Europe and North America as heretical. For the first time in the history of black religion, black clergy and theologians began to recognize the need for a completely new starting point in theology, and they insisted that it must be defined by people at the bottom and not from the top of the socioeconomic ladder. To accomplish this task, black theologians focused on God's liberation of the poor as the central message of the gospel.

To explicate the theological significance of the liberation motif, black theologians began to reread the Bible through the eyes of their slave grandparents and started to speak of God's solidarity with the wretched of the earth. As the political liberation of the poor emerged as the dominant motif, justice, love, and hope were reinterpreted in its light. For the biblical meaning of liberation, black theologians turned to the Exodus, while the message of the prophets provided the theological content for the theme of justice. The gospel story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus served as the biblical foundation for a reinterpretation of love, suffering, and hope in the context of the black struggle for liberation and justice.

There are many blacks, however, who find no spiritual or intellectual consolation in the Christian answer to the problem of theodicy. After nearly four hundred years of black presence in what is now known as the United States of America, black people still have to contend with white supremacy in every segment of their lives. This evil is so powerful and pervasive that no blacks can escape it. But poor blacks bear the heaviest brunt of it. The persistence of

racism makes the creation of meaning difficult for blacks inside and outside of the church.

Is God still going to call the oppressors to account? If so, when? Black churches seem to have no meaningful answer to these questions. They simply repeat worn-out religious clichés: "All things work out for the good for them who love the Lord." Black suffering in America and throughout the world, however, seems to be a blatant contradiction of that faith claim. No people are more religious than blacks. We faithfully attend churches and other religious services, giving reverence and love to the One who called us into being. But how long must black people wait for God to call our oppressors to account?

Black and womanist theologians have no satisfactory answers for the theodicy question either—at least not for those blacks looking for the meaning of our long struggle for justice. We can talk about God's justice and love from now to the end of time. But until our theological discourse engages white supremacy in a way that empowers poor people to fight the monster, then our theology is not worth the paper it is written on.

In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois said: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."²⁹ That message is as true today as it was when he uttered it. There is still no justice in the land for black people. "No justice, no peace," proclaimed blacks to whites during the 1992 Los Angeles riot. "No love, no justice" was Martin King's way of proclaiming to all who would listen. King's words are what whites want to hear when there is a racial disturbance in the black community. But African Americans want to know whether there is any reason to hope that the twenty-first century will be any less racist than the previous four centuries. Is there any reason to hope that we will be able to create a truly just society where justice and love flow freely

between whites and blacks and among all peoples of the earth? Let us hope that enough people will bear witness to justice and love so as to inspire others to believe that with God and the practice of freedom fighters "all things are possible."

FOR FURTHER CONVERSATION

Getting Clear

Professor Cone's theology is decisively shaped by the black experience.

1. What are the central elements of that experience, as reflected in Cone's theology?
2. How does that experience distinguish the African American vision of God from the view of God in what Cone describes as "dominant theologies"?
3. In what ways do black theologians differ with one another in their views of God?

Thinking about It

1. Why is experience an important element in shaping our view of God?
2. What does Cone mean when he concludes that black theologians saw the "dominant theologies of Europe and North America as heretical"?
3. If experience shapes our view of God, in what sense can we criticize someone else's view of God? If we can, what are the criteria we might use?

Acting on It

1. Think of the role that experience has played in shaping your view of God. List three experiences that have played a role and describe the impact they have had on your view of God.

2. Compare your notes with someone else.
3. Answer these questions:
 - a. What can you learn about God from the experience and views of other people or other communities?
 - b. What can you learn about your own views from making those comparisons?
 - c. Identify one specific step that you might take to insure that you continue to learn from the experience of others?

22. *The Works of Francis J. Grimke*, ed. C. G. Woodson (Washington D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1942), vol. 1, 354.

23. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1964), 46.

24. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" in his *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper, 1963), 90–91.

25. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 233.

26. *Ibid.*, 286.

27. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Thou Fool," Sermon, Mount Pisgah Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, August 27, 1967.

28. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 222.

29. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1961), 23.

University of Chicago Library Scan and Deliver



ILLiad TN: 2001000

TN: 2511020



Journal Title: The changing face of God

Volume: c.1

Issue:

Month/Year: 2000

Pages: 51-64

Article Author: James Cone

Article Title: God is the Color of Suffering

Cited In: ScanDelver

Notes:

Print Date: 6/19/2020 4:12 PM

Call #: BT102.A1 C475 2000 c.1

Location: JRL / Gen

Barcode: 58468610



ODYSSEY REQUEST

Elizabeth Sartell
esartell@uchicago.edu

Sent _____

ODYSSEY REQUEST

Notice: This material may be protected by
copyright law (Title 17 US Code)

4