

Color Symbolism and Third-World Religious Life

Introduction

In this paper I would like to discuss the effects of color symbolism in the spirituality of third-world Christians. By third-world Christians, I mean dark-skinned Christians. Among these I include Black American Christians. A characteristic feature of third-world Christians is their poverty and state of oppression. Oppression is not merely a material state for them but also a spiritual one. In other words, it is not merely economic and political but also psychological and mental.

Western theology or Christianity has played a large part in third-world oppression at both the material and psychical levels. In this paper, I will consider a specific dimension of this oppression, namely, the color symbolism of black and white found in western or white theology. I will attempt to show that it has perpetrated a symbolism in which the color white stands for everything that is spiritually good while the color black stands for everything that is spiritually evil. Third-world Christians have accepted white western theology along with its color symbolism. The effect has been to produce among third-world Christians a negative self-image and consequently, a second class or inferior spirituality, at best, and at worst, a schizoid one. What third-world Christians need to do is to become aware of the oppressive nature of the western theological symbolism of black and white so that they can liberate themselves from it. This is the task we propose to do here.

Color as Symbol

Colors convey meaning. Meanings could be conveyed either denotatively or connotatively. A denotative meaning is expressed by words that refer to specific objects or events. For example, the word *smoke* refers directly to the gaseous object which results from burning. But the same word suggests, indicates or symbolizes along with, or in addition to the explicit and recognized meaning, another meaning, as in this instance, that of fire.¹

Color at the denotative level is neutral. Color is just color, that is, a physical and optic phenomenon. As Webster's Dictionary defines it, it is a "sensation evoked as a response to the stimulation of the eye and its

¹See my book, *The Dark Center* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1973), p. 5.

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attached nervous mechanism by radiant energy of certain wave lengths and intensities." At the connotative level, colors take on added meaning imposed upon them subjectively or conventionally by various cultures. Thus, racial groups are color coded. Caucasians are called "white," Negroes "black," Japanese "yellow," Malayan "brown," Indians "red," and so on. The color coding of racial groups influences the way in which these groups are perceived and reacted to, because cultures attach different meanings to colors.²

Western Symbolism of Black and White

It is obvious that our interest here is the connotative meanings of the colors black and white in white Christian theology and religion. Let us briefly indicate the various connotative meanings of the colors black and white in western tradition and culture. Thus, black is commonly associated with woe, gloom, darkness, dread, death, terror, wickedness, curse, defilement, error, annihilation, and despair. In contrast to these negative meanings of the color black are positive meanings associated with the color white, namely, triumph, light, innocence, joy, divine power, purity, regeneration, happiness, gaiety, peace, chastity, truth, modesty, femininity and delicacy.³

This western color symbolism of black and white permeates all western languages both sacred and profane. As Howard Thurman notes, "the identification of blackness with evil, with the ominous, the destructive, the terrifying, is all through the language both sacred and profane. Black magic is evil; so is a black crime, but a white lie is acceptable."⁴

To better understand the basis for the western color symbolism of black and white, let us consider its sources and the subsequent historical development of the symbolism and its various applications.

Secular Source

The two main sources for the western color symbolism of black and white are Greek culture and the consequent hellenization of the Bible. In Greek literature, Euripides associates black with death as in "the black-robed ruler of the dead" and in Virgil the black Styx has a similar symbolism as the appropriate hue for the dead. In Homer, black is applied to death, destiny and pangs, while the Greek tragedians apply the epithet black to the Furies, Tartarus, the heart and mind, Hades, and Erebus.⁵

By way of contrast, white is applied to purity and to godliness. Thus, Homer in his *Odyssey* applies the epithet "white-armed" to Nausicaa and to Arete, and in the *Iliad* to Hero. Euripides and Sophocles use white to apply to clothing symbolic of the divine. The Latin classic of Virgil uses

²See Deborah T. Sharpe, *The Psychology of Color and Design* (N.J.: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1975), p. 47.

³See the article of Kenneth J. Gergen, "The Significance of Skin Color in Human Relations," *Color and Race*, ed. J. H. Franklin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 119.

⁴See his book, *The Luminous Darkness* (New York: 1965), pp. 59-60.

⁵P. J. Heather, "Colour Symbolism," *Folklore*, 59 (1948), p. 169.

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the adjective "candidus" (white) for Alexis, Nais, Dido, Venus, and of "niveus" (snow-white) for Palla and for the arms of the goddess Venus.⁶

The Greek philosopher Plato gave a philosophic basis for the black-white symbolism found in Greek mythology and literature. In Plato's most famous dialogue, *The Republic*, we find the allegory of the cave which has been considered by the western mind as the summation of the symbolism of light and darkness. Thus, the cave represents this world which is symbolized as dark. Outside the cave is the true and enduring world, illumined by the beneficent rays of God whom Plato calls the Good. The dialectic in Plato is from darkness to light, that is, a departure from this present world into the other world beyond. This present world is seen as the region of sin, error and mere opinion. The other world, in contrast, is the realm of truth and certainty, of the real and the unchanging. The cave represents, at a different level, the darkness of the human mind, ignorant and bereft of the knowledge of eternal forms, filled only with sense knowledge which furnishes one with mere opinion. The illuminated world outside the cave represents the state of the human mind illumined by the Divine Intellect and is therefore possessed of eternal forms. Darkness is thus equated with lack of awareness, with a state of ignorance, while light is equated with awareness and a state of knowledge. In sum, darkness for Plato symbolizes ignorance, the sub-human and sensual, the nether world; while light symbolizes knowledge, the rational, the heavenly and the divine.⁷

In fairness to Plato, let me note here that darkness was also used to symbolize the reality beyond reason, that is, God, for Plato's God was described as the beyond being or Non-being. Darkness was thus an ambivalent symbol for Plato. But western thought influenced by Aristotelian logic took a non-ambivalent view of the symbolism, taking darkness to mean only negative values and white to mean only positive values. It was this one-sided symbolism, based on the Aristotelian principle of noncontradiction, which the early western theologians brought with them in the understanding of the Bible. Let us therefore go to the Bible and observe how white Christianity understood and interpreted the Biblical symbolism of black and white.

Scriptural Source

Let me note beforehand that the Scriptures in themselves do not teach a one-sided symbolism of darkness or blackness as negative and whiteness or light as positive, for, as a matter of fact, darkness and light, black and white are used ambivalently in the Bible. It was white Christianity and white theology under the influence of the one-sided interpretation of Plato's symbolism that selectively chose those passages in the Bible that portrayed darkness or black as only negative and white or light as only positive. As a result of this *a priori* frame of reference, we find the following color symbolism:

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁷*The Dark Center*, pp. 114-115.

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Darkness was the night with all its scourges. Light was day, holiness and life with God. It was necessary therefore to pass from darkness to light, to emerge from the darkness of Egypt and to enter the path of light. This was a call for a strict moral life in fraternal charity by the imitation of God, who is light.⁸

Thus, we can see from the above passage the close parallelism between Plato's cave and Egypt from which one must emerge to enter the region of light, the heavenly Jerusalem. The whole of Christian ethics and spirituality became that of a flight from and a hatred of darkness. Jesus was seen as the light of the world; the world itself seen as darkness. The Christian was forced to choose between light and darkness which meant God or the Devil, heaven or hell.

The image of God in the minds of many Christians is that of a kindly, benevolent, bewhiskered white man, seated on a white-throne, surrounded by blond and brunette angels who stand ready to serve Him in praises or as messengers. The Devil, on the other hand, is the Prince of Darkness while the imps of the Devil are black.⁹

In sum, in white Christianity, white is used to express the pure, while black expresses the diabolical. The conflict between Christ and Satan, the spiritual and the carnal, good and evil came finally to be expressed by the conflict between white and black, which underlines and synthesizes all others.

The Bleaching of Christianity

In accordance with the western Biblical symbolism of black and white, Christianity underwent a bleaching process. It became white. First of all, Christ who is the revelatory symbol of the Divine, had to be white. Thus, the dark and wooly hair and beard which the Semitic Christ had took one the color of sunshine, symbolizing the brightness of light above and the God in whom there is no darkness. His eyes assumed the color of the sky. Roger Bastide rightly notes that "the progressive Aryanization of Christ is in strict accordance with the logic of the color symbolism," namely, that "it was necessary that this man, the incarnation of God, be as far removed as possible from everything that could suggest darkness or blackness, even indirectly."¹⁰

Besides the person of Jesus, his garments had also to be whitened so as to indicate divinity. And all those closely associated with Christ also underwent a bleaching process. Thus, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was portrayed as a blond woman and her garments were either white or blue to signify the heavenly. Her altars are white, the ornaments of the priests officiating are white, and white is worn on her festival day. This meaning is also present in the use of white garments for brides.

The color symbolism of white as superior to black also affected wise men and saints. Thus, in the paintings of the Three Kings or Three Wise Men, Balthasar, the Negro King, was situated behind the other two or

⁸Thierry Maertens, *Bible Themes* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1964), Vol. II, p. 161.

⁹Thurman, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

¹⁰See his article, "Color, Racism, and Christianity," in *Color and Race*, ed. J. H. Franklin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 37.

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even sometimes kneeling closest to the Babe, but never between the other two, to signify the polarity between black and white. The Christian saints, too, had to be symbolized by white, since virtue is white while vice is black. As Evarts notes, "white because it is pure and untouched becomes also the symbol of chastity, and is used with this meaning in the early Christian paintings as the background of the saint."¹¹ The result of this whitening process is that black saints were either ignored, whitened, or depicted as second class saints.

The color symbolism of black as evil and sinful while white is pure and virginal is transposed to the realm of sex and marriage. As Bastide notes, a distinction is always made between a white woman, the object of legitimate courtship and marriage, and the colored woman, the mistress, who is an object of pleasure. The colored woman came to symbolize sin and carnal pleasure.

White Christianity discouraged the white man from interracial marriage or sex with the colored woman by arousing fear in him through the suggestion that the contagiousness of a dark skin was associated with the contagiousness of sin. He was made to believe that the mere presence of a dark-skinned woman sullied his eyes and marked his flesh. He was taught that the power of the Devil was such that contact with African women "who bore the color of the Prince of Darkness" would be contact with the Devil. Besides these moral barriers, aesthetic ones were also put up. Thus, a black skin was associated with ugliness, with stain and pollution, with unbearable odors and with oiliness. When these moral and aesthetic barriers proved ineffective, legal barriers were established, namely, segregation by color in public places: in churches, in eating places, in trains and streetcars, in theaters and in schools, etc., so white children could not be influenced by the Devil working through colored children.

Color Symbolism in Western Literature

The religious symbolism of black and white is carried over into the literature of the sixteenth and succeeding centuries. Next to the Bible, perhaps the most influential and most widely read work in western literature in Shakespeare's writings. Shakespeare, in *Love's Labour's Lost*, uses "black as the badge of hell, the hue of the dungeon, and the suit of night." In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet is a snowy dove, whiter than new snow. But it is in *Othello* that the symbolism of black and white is expressed throughout. There is a symbolic joining of sin, the devil, and sex, with blackness of skin; and beauty, purity, innocence with whiteness. Desdemona's white skin symbolizes purity, fairness, innocence, while Othello's blackness symbolizes sin, devilish sex. The use of black in Shakespeare are: death's black veil, black as death, black as ink, black as a crow, black ram, let the devil wear black, damn'd as black, the devil damn thee black, a black deed, black villainy, black sins.¹²

¹¹See Arrah B. Evarts, "Color Symbolism," *Psychoanalytic Review*, 6 (1919), p. 130.

¹²P. J. Heather, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

In Milton, black is used in connection with hell, death and sin, sorrow, drugs, adversity. In Tennyson, black is used in connection with lies, the devil and fiend. White in these authors is applied to the robe of saints, life, truth, a white lie, blamelessness, innocence, maidens in white, knights in white, virginity, sanctity, virtue, peace, and so on.¹³

Color Symbolism Secularized

The theological symbolism of black and white in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came slowly to be secularized. The notion of election became secularized to mean economic and material success. Where before, the whiteness of skin came to symbolize the chosen or elect people of God, now it came to signify material, scientific and technological success. And where before, darkness of skin came to symbolize the heathens and the descendants of Ham, now it came to be equated with a prescientific mentality, economic poverty and degradation.

Instead of invoking the Bible as a justification for the superiority of whites at the economic level, science and logic were now invoked. Thus, in terms of the Darwinian law of survival of the fittest, whites were considered to be the fittest to survive. In either case, the economic situation of white superiority and black inferiority was made to fit an *a priori* belief that whites were the elect of God or in secular terms, were the fittest biologically.

And today, even if the colors black and white have taken on other meanings, these meanings still follow, however, the basic polarity founded centuries before on the white purity of the elect and the blackness of Satan.

Color Symbolism and the Western Psyche

In the psyche of secular western man, the theological symbolism has not been totally eradicated. It has merely gone deeper into the lower level of the psyche where its power has become more destructive because it remains largely unconscious.

Let us analyze psychologically how the black-white color symbolism operative at both the conscious and unconscious levels has influenced the behavior of western man.

In the western psyche, since black has been equated with sin and the devil, the effect has been to uproot from the individual and collective psyche all manner of darkness and to project them onto people with dark skins. This phenomenon is called by the psychologist Eric Neumann, scapegoat psychology.¹⁴ Evil which is recognized as belonging to the collective structure of one's own tribe is eliminated in a collective manner by transferring the sins of the people to the scapegoat as a vicarious sacrifice. In the western world, the scapegoats are dark-skinned peoples.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 176-177.

¹⁴See his book, *Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, trans. by Eugene Rolfe (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), p. 51.

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The ironic thing about the scapegoat psychology is the belief that acts committed against scapegoats are moral, even done zealously in the name of God. Thus, as Neumann observes: "True to the basic principle of the scapegoat psychology, the conscious mind believes itself to be identical with the higher values and commits the most appalling atrocities in the sublime self-assurance of an "absolutely clear conscience."¹⁵ When the symbolism of black as bestial and subhuman, as devilish and damned, has been projected onto peoples with dark skins, then slavery, dehumanization, cultural and economic aggression and exploitation are justified.

What makes the western black-white color symbolism so destructive is the way it is taught, that is, by suggestion and by non-verbal communication. By the very use of the English language, one's valuations and attitudes towards the colors black and white are unconsciously formed. In movies, comic strips, plays, the hero is always the white man, while the dark-skinned man is the symbol of evil, the bad man. As Franz Fanon rightly observes, the young Antillean identifies with the hero who is white. When in school he had read stories of savages told by white men, he always thinks of the Senegalese.¹⁶ The wolf, the devil, the evil spirit, the bad man, the savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians, says Fanon.¹⁷ Slowly and subtly, with the help of books, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, radio—the color symbolism of black as evil and white as good, work their way into one's mind and shape one's view of the world and of oneself. At the subconscious and unconscious levels is formed and crystallized an attitude and a way of thinking and seeing that are essentially white. Investigators like Williams and Henninger noted that as early as three years, the symbols of black as bad and white as good are formed. A dramatic example of a learning situation to which children are exposed to the black-bad, white-good concepts is in the teaching aid called *The Wordless Book* in which each of its five colored pages represents particular religious concept, with the black page representing sin and the white page representing the absence of sin.

Color Symbolism and the Colored Man's Psyche

Perhaps the worst form of oppression is not physical but mental and psychological. The injuries and wounds from physical oppression heal more easily and faster than psychological wounds induced since childhood. To hate one's color, to flee from darkness, to hate one's own kind are by far the worst form of oppression that the white man has perpetrated on dark-skinned peoples. What makes it doubly insidious is that now the white man does not have to do the oppressing. Having made dark-skinned peoples hate blackness, he merely sits back and watches dark-skinned peoples project their hatred of blackness on their own kind. What has happened is that the color symbolism of black and white has

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁶ See his influential book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), pp. 147-48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

been interiorized in dark-skinned peoples. It has given rise to a neurophatic character marked by a guilt complex, and as Fanon notes, a collapse of the psychic structure. Self-esteem has been impaired as a result of the symbolism, and the accompanying self-hatred has been generalized and projected to hatred of the entire dark-skinned peoples.¹⁸

Counteracting the Western Color Symbolism

Having described the oppressive effects of the western color symbolism of black and white, it now remains to discuss some means by which the negative color symbolism may be counteracted.

Past attempts have been to reverse the symbolism completely. Thus, black now stands for good and white for evil and the devil. As Elijah Muhammad has said, the white man is the devil. The Black Nation of Islam is the chosen people elected by Allah. In Muhammad's eschatological teaching, the struggle is to be between the Black Nation and the Caucasian race, or the world of Islam and the world of Christianity. In theory, the Nation of Islam is composed of the Black population of the United States, but in practice and for the time being, it is composed of the followers of Elijah Muhammad.¹⁹

Another effort is that made by Albert B. Cleage, Jr., who claims in his book, *The Black Messiah*, that Israel was a black nation and that the descendants of the original black Jews are in Africa. The Bible was written by Black Jews; the Old Testament is the history of Black Jews. The Black Nation is God's chosen people.²⁰

The effort to reverse the symbolism, it seems to me, is destructive of human unity and brotherhood which is the basic teaching of Christianity. It would result in a reverse form of racism and oppression.

Another attempt accepts the symbolism of black as negative. For example, James Cone in his book, *Black Theology*, sees black as the symbol of the oppressed, the weak, the suffering and the poor. But he claims that Jesus came to minister to the poor, the oppressed and the suffering. They are therefore God's chosen people. I wonder, though, whether many blacks would accept this negative symbolism of the color black.

The Ambivalence of Color Symbols

In my book, *The Dark Center*, I propose a method by which the western color symbolism may be counteracted. I do not have the time nor the space to discuss adequately the method proposed. I can only give a very sketchy outline of the solution.

I have noted earlier that the economic, political and social superiority of whites is really the result of their belief in the symbolism of white as the elect of God, as the biologically fittest. I have noted too the philosophical basis and the theological basis of this western symbolism of color. If therefore

¹⁸Gergen, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

¹⁹See E. U. Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 6.

²⁰Published by Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1968, p. 111.

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the economic situation is a result of the philosophic and theological color symbolism, it is not enough to attack oppression merely at the economic, political and social levels. One must attack it also at the ideological or ideational level. For as long as the white man believes that white is good and black is evil, no amount of empirical evidence to the contrary would dissuade him of this belief.

I attempt in my book to develop a more adequate philosophy which I call the philosophy of process in which the ambivalence of light and darkness, of black and white are justified. By ambivalence, we mean that the color black is a symbol of both negative and positive values, and so is the color white. Empirically, it is easy to see that the source of the light energy of the sun is its dark center; the source of the fruitfulness of crops is the dark soil; the source of birth is the darkness of the womb; the source of our present energies are black coal and black oil; and a black sky forecasts rain, hence, life-giving water for a verdant earth.

In almost all cultures, except the west, black has been an ambivalent symbol. It has signified the devil, but it has also signified the Divine. This is true also in the Bible and even in early Greek religions. In India, Buddha's complexion as black; his hair woolly. In Egypt, the God Osiris had a black complexion and his hair was woolly. Again, in India, Ies Christna, the ninth incarnation of Vishnu had a black complexion and his hair was woolly. In China, Lao-tze who was a divine incarnation in human form was born of a virgin black in complexion and as beautiful as jasper. In Mexico, Quetzalcoatl, the Messiah, had a black complexion and his hair was woolly. In Africa, black is a sacred color but so is white. Black animals are offered but so are white animals. According to one Maasai myth, there were originally four gods, of whom the black was very good, the white was good, the blue was neither good nor bad, and the red was bad.²¹

Lest we think that God is imaged according to the color of the believer, we observe that even in Greece, all the Gods and Goddesses were black. This was the case with Jupiter, Bacchus, Hercules, Venus, Isis, Hecate, Juno, Metis, Ceres, Bybele, etc.²²

God as the Divine Darkness

Third-world Christianity is eastern rather than western. Western Christianity is conceptual, rational, metaphysical, as opposed to the eastern one which is mystical and poetic. Western theology expresses God in the category of being or idea. As St. Anselm defines God, God is the idea than which nothing greater can be thought of. But in eastern thought, God is the beyond being or is non-being.

In the mystical theology of Dionysius, God is spoken of and experienced as the Divine Darkness, for he is experienced as beyond the

²¹ See John S. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 154.

²² George Higgins, *Anacalypsis*, Vol. I. (Quoted from J. A. Rogers, *Sex and Race*, I (New York: Helga M. Rogers, 9th ed., 1967), p. 332.

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senses and the operations of the intellect.²³ But the Divine Darkness is also a super-essential Radiance. Divine Darkness is contrasted to sub-darkness or nether darkness which is the absence of light. At the level of knowledge, ignorance is symbolized as darkness of mind, but knowledge that transcends the power of reason is also symbolized as darkness. The symbolization of transcendent knowledge as darkness may be seen from our experience of looking directly into the sun. Thus, an excess of light is blinding. We are unable to see. Darkness then is an ambivalent symbol. There is a negative darkness or sub-darkness which is ignorance, untruth, lack of reality or illusion. But there is a positive darkness which is transcendent knowledge, reality and experience. When St. John the evangelist spoke of God as the Light in whom there is no darkness, we interpret this to mean that God has no negative darkness which is ignorance, lack of fulness of reality. God is all-knowing and supreme reality; he is absolute perfection. But these attributes of God are properly expressed or symbolized as Divine Darkness, which means, an excess of light. Reason confronted with transcendent truth and reality is blinded by the excess of light, hence, it experiences the divine as darkness.

In western Christianity, the sun has been used as a symbol of the divine. As the sun is the source of life and energy, so is God the sun of the spiritual life. But we suggest that for third-world spirituality, a black hole is a more appropriate symbol of the divine as darkness. For as the black hole represents an excess of light such that it appears invisible to the naked eye, so the Divine as a super-essential Radiance appears dark to the human intellect.

Revelation and Faith are also to be expressed in third-world theology and spirituality as a saving darkness. The light of reason is inadequate to guide man towards truth and salvation. A superior light, that of revelation and faith is needed. But to reason, the light of faith appears as a darkness. But there is no way for reason to be saved and redeemed except through saving darkness. Therefore, instead of fleeing from darkness, it must learn to embrace it. Western man has been fleeing from darkness and in the process has brought woe and destruction to the world. Perhaps, third-world Christianity and spirituality can bring back an experience of the divine to secularist western society.

²³See the *Mystical Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite* (London: The Shrine of Wisdom, 1923), p. 5.