

## Evil, Being Black, And Love

The revival of interest in the problem of evil has coincided with a popular concentration on the holocaust. The two may not be connected. Evil as a theological problem or stumbling block in the religious life continually re-emerges because it is never really solved. The dilemma evil poses looms up more decisively in a modern era just because many want to ban evil and be convinced of human progress. Like Marx, they want to let men bear their own responsibility for evil without calling on God. It is partly, then, the enormity of the destruction of the holocaust, plus our growing disillusionment with modern notions of progress or human evolution, that has brought evil back as a problem.

'Holocaust' means any destruction of catastrophic proportions, but we have come to use the term primarily to refer to Nazi destruction of the Jews in Europe during of the Second World War. Cambodia is another recent example of a holocaust, and Stalin's Russia may have liquidated greater numbers. But Elie Wiesel and other writers have made 'holocaust' a peculiarly Jewish word. Americans were not destroyed by Hitler's projected "final solution," but our ties are closer to Europe and the Jews than to Cambodia or Russia. Holocaust may be too strong a word to use about Negro slavery in America, but why must we go to Europe to find examples of evil in modern times? The evil of race at home should be the evil that disturbs us most.

Even if what I say is true and Americans should be more concerned about the evil of racial destruction in America than about Jews in Europe, why should I (who am not black) point this out? I have written two books on the problem of evil and two on religion in America.\*\* How can one reconcile the depth and strength of religion in the Black community with the fact that, as a group, they graphically represent the problem of evil? Its destructive effects continue in a land which was dominated by a religious vision for at least the first two hundred years of its

---

\*Frederick Sontag is on the faculty at Pomona College

\*\**God, Why Did You Do That?*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1970; *The God of Evil*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, 1970; *The American Religious Experience*, with John K. Roth, Harper & Row, New York, 1972; and *God and America's Future*, with John K. Roth, McGrath Publishing Company, Wilmington, North Carolina, 1977.

existence.

In Liberal theological circles, we think of religious commitment as going hand in hand with social progress. Perhaps such simple notions of progress do not fit the special temper of our religious life very well. Blacks never ceased to believe in God, whereas affluent whites promoted the "Death of God" theology. Black religious faith was seldom rewarded by any measurable outward improvements. In fact, defection away from religion comes with economic and political improvement rather than from continued poverty. How can Blacks believe the promise of God's love and still experience evil as the constant destruction of their life?

Is the Black church in America a spiritual storehouse of love and forgiveness just because, like Jesus, its members were "despised and rejected of men"? Moonies tell us that, when they are berated on street corners, they understand how Jesus felt. Is it because Blacks have been involved in a slow holocaust in America that they are (some of them) more easily open to receive God's message of love? We know that affluence tends to cause a decline in religious commitment, and a rising level of education and intellectual interest tends to weaken religious fervor. As religion has declined in its influence in America, where can it hope for renewal to come from if not from the Black church?

The dilemma, of course, is that those who suffer build up hatred and repressed aggressions. Thus, although discovering God's love may sustain the one who suffers, he or she has trouble sharing this because it is one thing to receive love from one who has also suffered (e.g. Jesus) and another to share this with those who have not had this gift given to them and yet need regeneration. Once outside the experience of receiving love, hatred and aggression tend to take over whether consciously intended or not. However, in the case of Jesus, the message is misread if we do not understand that God's love is given only on the condition that it be shared. It can never be a love privately enjoyed. It must be passed on. But if it was given in the midst of a holocaust, can it be returned to those who are responsible for the destruction?

The Black church holds in its hands the power to renew Christian love in America just because we have forgotten what God's love means. We confuse it with enjoying the company of like-minded friends or a theatrical event. If the Black church can set aside the self-defensive tactics it uses to preserve itself from the continued slow holocaust in America, if it can rise and turn its experience of love and forgiveness outward, it could give us a visible demonstration of what God's love means, just as Jesus once did. We need such demonstrations in each new day, since God's love is so different and non-obvious that we easily forget what it means. It is unlike our ordinary notion of love as enjoyment.

God's love inspires forgiveness when forgiveness is least deserved, which is why the way of love Jesus pointed out is both against nature

and hard to follow. The problem is that the Black community is so caught up with upward social and economic mobility, plus the fight to protect its rights, that everything gets lost in the trample to enjoy a moment in the sun. We know that minorities protest least when conditions are the most repressive, just because protest seems so useless, and they protest most just as improvement begins to dawn. Thus, the spiritual gains we make in a time of enforced public silence are easily overlooked when political visibility and pressure become our concern. How can those who are on the rise after years of suppression be reminded of the lesson of forgiving love?

In two books on evil I tried to argue that, in the modern age, we have to see God as responsible for evil as well as good. In a day in which we know that the frame of nature can be altered, we also know that anything we have now learned to do God could have done to improve nature from the beginning, e.g., eliminate smallpox. The problem with this modern discovery about God is that it flies in the face of the bourgeois perception of God as a comfortable solver of all our problems. We want God to approve and support our self-improvement style of life. The notion of a God who willfully allows evil is repugnant to a rising middle class.

However, the Black church first learned to know God in different circumstances. They found him in the midst of destruction. That early experience, if not forgotten in the wake of economic and political success, can tie God in with our experience of evil without contradiction. However, once God has been made comfortable and is culturally integrated, his connection to near destruction and rage tends to be forgotten. We have heard a lot recently about "Black rage," and we should, since one of the mysteries surrounding the Jewish holocaust is their and our lack of rage over the events as they unfolded. Yet, as rage wells up when improve status allows us to show it, love succumbs. It tends to die in rage, although paradoxically it was originally born in suffering.

If the problem of evil is a major road block to religious life today, and if this is partly because those who have become quietly and properly pious wish to block out God's presence in destruction, Black theology has a role of importance to play. Hidden in the Black religious experience is the personal knowledge that God can be found in the midst of destruction and that the love discovered there is not alien to inflicted pain. As long as we paint God as lily white, we will never form a theological notion of God adequate to the pain and destruction all around us in the present day.

Americans are particularly at sea on this question, because the traditional religious notion connected to our founding is that now, on these distant shores, we will cut evil out and find a new ideal society in contrast to Europe's decadence. But the major flaw in this dream to build a

new society dedicated to God was the compromise which allowed slavery to continue. Thus, the black rock on which this lovely notion of the new America flounders is the same rock that can give us back our understanding of how God can love and still be connected to and present in destruction. The originally projected aim to build ideal Protestant communities failed. But in the experience of slavery in America a more adequate notion of God lies hidden.

What is called "Black Theology" has not performed this function of discovering how experiencing God's love is connected to slavery. Like the Jews, we must undergo bondage first before we can know what release and divine love mean. Black Theology has tended to follow South American or European and Marxist Liberation Theology, rather than drawing its experience of God out of its own community's life, which means to learn to live on the brink of destruction.\*\*\* Valid as these imported forms of theology may be, they disclose Black rage more than God's love as it is felt and as it sustains those in the slow holocaust of Black life.

What we call early American theology was not very 'American' at all. It was simply footnotes written on the Continental theology from which the early groups stemmed. It could not have been otherwise; there was no history in the lan?eology out of the American religious experience as it stands to date, Black theology, as it reflects on the vividness of God's presence in the midst of slavery and human degradation, is one central part. It helps us understand how God has appeared on American soil as well as in Egypt and Israel. The Black church has a theodicy to write, because they learned how to reconcile God's love with suffering the hard way.

Of course, to reflect on what it meant to be Black and Christian in America in the past will not connect with either the Black or the white communities today. We need to take the experience out of which Negro spirituals were formed, for example, and update it so that it can guide us in the 80's. W. E. B. DuBois tried to tell America and the Black community that to settle for second-class citizenship in the long run could not succeed. And the tremendous upheavals in the Black community since his time have proven him right. But, now that the drive is on for equality and an open acceptanc? It can be just because Blacks are repeating the white experience and its sad discovery. To achieve success is not the same as to be freed from all forms of slavery. It merely trades one master for another, unless we are careful. To want every cultural advantage and to fight for economic success is a slavery of another kind. Everything and everyone else is forgotten except your own goals. Those who escape the bonds of racial restriction do not automatically become those

---

\*\*\*See my "Cocunut Theology", in the Journal of Religious Thought, Vol. 36, No. 2, Fall/Winter 1979-80, pp. 5-12.

who express love and forgiveness and thus show us God. The affluent, success-oriented Black is not really much different than his counterpart in any other race. The God disclosed in conditions of legal slavery is still needed to release us from the other forms of bondage men have devised for themselves. Can the love once found be remembered and shared when slavery is past?