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Theological Framework for Transformation of White Racists

First I want to discuss a framework of methodology for this paper which will permit the development of a theological encounter with white racism from a White male perspective. Next I want to place this encounter in the context of justice, engaging the paradigms of Christian understanding. Within this context I will then engage the particular aspect of injustice that I am examining, namely: white racism; the racism of my people. Specifically, I want to look at the racism of White males in a way that engages White male oppression against those who White males define as "other," or as deviants from a White male norm of acceptable relationship.

Basically, I hope to derive from these considerations a theology of repentance, transformation and reconciliation which, I assume, is necessary for the healing of a radically broken community, the White-induced broken oneness of the mysterious Oneness of God. Let me say at the outset that I don't expect to see White males fall over themselves in a rush to engage the theological praxis suggested below. It demands a radical redefinition of themselves and their understanding of power.

When we examine ourselves from a theological perspective, we enter the realm of "lack," of what is presently missing in our current

* After desperately searching our files, no covering letter was found by press time for this unsolicited manuscript. We hope to reveal the author's identity in the next issue. (Ed.)

understanding of God.[1] At the center of this realm is mystery, the elusive unknown. Mystery is at the center of all exploration and discovery, including our attempts to find meaning. Exploration presupposes something unknown, something mysterious as a destination. Were there no mystery, there would be no need to search. The answer to mystery remains a mystery. Yet we continue to look for that answer. We seek knowledge of mystery, the paradoxically unknowable, because we are unwilling to accept an incomplete answer.[2]

This is true in the case of theological heritage as well. Were we satisfied with the theological meanings handed down to us through our cultures we would have no need to explore further. Were all Christians satisfied with the traditional understandings of Jesus they would have no need in our time to search for new meanings for God. But something prods us. Something in our existence and experience. In the realm of social understanding it is a question we find in the paradoxes of our culture: the brutal injustices, in the oppression in which we find ourselves engaged at sites of subjugation and resistance. At other times, we discover the question in the pure and overwhelming confrontation we have with our existential experience. At still other times the meaning we seek teases us from mystery itself as an eruption of illumination for which we can find no word. A dimension for which we know no coordinates, but of which we understand ourselves to be an emerging part.

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[1] "Lack," for me, signifies absence of the primordial "Other" which can be recovered in mystical or sexual union. I am using "lack" in the sense of Jacques Lacan, as interpreted by Anthony Wilden in *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press): 163-4. Amplification can be found in Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 151-7.

[2] Mystery can be translated into the "mystic," which is a direct touch in and with ultimate reality, or God, without the attributes of phenomenological formation. It cannot be described or contained. Mystery is also God's immance in culture and experience, in which case it takes on "spiritual" characteristics.

Culture informs our search.[3] Experience in existence informs it. And mystery informs it. These three comprise the three dimensions of theological discovery—culture, experience, and mystery. The creative norm we use is language. The referential norm is ultimacy, or God. The judgmental norm—the norm that judges what we say and do with our theology—comes from our culture.

My particular perspective for this exploration is "postmodern." I will not explore what I mean by postmodernism except to summarize it as a philosophical position which deconstructs any definition of meaning to paradox, provisionality, contradiction and conditionality.[4] At the point of contradiction and provisionality we must make a wager about meaning. Through this wager we must first discover and then explore what we mean. My wager is that mystery, experience and culture are the key relationships that inform ultimate meaning which includes meaning in the context of justice.

Further, at the point of wager, we also engage in politics. When we name something, we give it power in a power relationship. For example, if we name some things "Black" and "White," we append attributes and give the names power. "Black" and "White" become signifiers of meaning in a relationship of power. If we name something

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[3] Culture begins for me with the emergence of "otherness" in an individual's experience. This includes the self splitting-off that becomes reinforced and acculturated by language and image; the reinforcement in which one becomes an object to oneself as subject.

[4] My description here is limited to deconstructive and constructive post-modernism from a theological perspective. For a fuller treatment, see David Ray Griffin, *God and Religion in a Postmodern World*, (Albany: State University of New york Press, 1989), 1-11. Ellen K. Wondra sees post-modern theological demarcation in two events: "in "Theology in a Postmodern Key, "*Plumbline*, (December 1989): 5, which she restates as the "recovery of the relational self." Various forms of globalization contribute to otherness and automonous-self breakdown, and as well, to the disruption of the notion that there is a single truth (Wondra, p.6). See also, Fredrick Jameson, "Marxism and Postmodernism, "*New Left Review* (Fall 1989), 31-45.

"God," we also give it power and meaning.[5]

What I am suggesting is that theological undertakings are approached methodologically from mystery, experience and culture, with ourselves at the center of experience. The experience of our existence as an identity, a name, a signifier. From this center, which is also a wager in terms of meaning, we find ultimate mystery within mystery and in culture. It is this center which speculates, drawing on mystery and culture. It is this center— the methodological center of our undertaking—which in its existence and experience seeks knowledge of its destination. This methodology, therefore, draws on culture, on our identity's experience of existence, and on mystery.

What confirms our personal center as experience of existence is our understanding of its transience in existence. A transience marked by personal death and seen in the deaths of others, including those who die in the midst of injustice. In this sense mystery also informs through the deaths we experience of others. The deaths within the existence we share with them. Our confrontations with our own deaths lend meaning to the deaths of others. We share a solidarity in death as the common mystery we all encounter. We also share a power relationship to death because of the deaths of others in an unjust cultural situation we help to continue. Power, here, is the power to name the dead. A power which Whites know all too well.[6]

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[5] Jamaican and Cambridge art Historian Stuart Hall described deconstruction using the term "black," during a guest lecture at SUNY-Binghamton in March 1989 (from my notes). When our terms or names discourse in culture they take on political valence; any term's deconstruction requires a wager at the point to which it is deconstructed, a wager in meaning. This meaning is political. Naming thus becomes an action of power in the political realm, a wager that a name will signify power and accrue power to it, or deny it power, as an identifying force.

[6] Rebecca S. Chopps in *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986) expresses intersubjectivity as solidarity, including solidarity with the dead (pp. 43-44; 129-125). James H. Cone in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), suggests the resurrection events gives us the rationale to resist to the death. If we believe the resurrection to be so, then we need not fear death in resistance to oppression.

Ironically, death gives us a motive to understand mystery and tells us that we are specially alone with our question, even though we can understand ourselves in solidarity with the dead. We may be able to name death, but we do not know death until it comes. Thus, it remains a mystery to our existence in life. It is the existential model of mystery. Because we cannot answer the question of the experience of our individual death, we cannot fully answer the question of mystery. All answers we arrive at are, therefore, provisional. All the meanings of life we purport are conditional. Life does not provide the answer to death. It only shows us what death looks like on the "outside." Only death provides its answer. Since we are alive and speculating, by nature of its definition, we cannot be dead. Yet we know death to be a destination for which we seek an answer.

At the center of ourselves and at the center of our death and the deaths of others, then, is the existential, ultimate mystery for which we find a provisional normative solution in Christianity. The solution we name "God."[7] God is a word that is informed from ultimate mystery, from experience, and from culture. God is the ultimate mystery we seek to know from our personal center, where mystery resides with us from its elusive, unknown beyondness. The same center from which we are informed by culture and in that relationship, the same personal center we share with others. God, therefore, as the name of mystery, is at our center, sharing it and informing it. God is the word we use to describe the meaning of the mystery we want to apprehend. God is the question for ultimate meaning and the answer to ultimate meaning. We mediate that meaning through our experience in existence, drawing on the language of our culture.

God approaches us from culture as well, from our experience of culture in our own existence, and from culture's language. God is that

[7] I view these and the following as significations of ways the inexpressibility of the mystery of God become expressible.

which tells us something is awry in the culture that informs us; that something is unjust, incomplete. This information comes from culture synchronically and diachronically, from the relationships within culture today, and from the traditions of culture in all the ways those traditions are mediated. The particular cultural tradition we work within is the Christian tradition, thus God is understood to be an encounter with the understanding that the tradition has of the historical person of Jesus Christ. However, just as we understand meaning to be incomplete and provisional, so is cultural talk about God and the cultural experience of God in the tradition of Jesus Christ. They too are incomplete and provisional attempts to find God, and the meaning of God, in the community we share. This provisionality is significant for examining a dominant culture's appropriation of the meaning of God; it tells the dominant culture—White culture in this case—that its understanding is culture-bound and contingent. Intriguingly, life also contains a sense of completion, of the absolute, and of destination. Death as the end of life represents an apparent completion of life, so the concept of completion has a meaning that involves the mystery of death as a destination.

Completion and destination guide methodology. And the mystery of death, as a paradigm of mystery and an understanding of finite completion, also guides methodology. At this point Christian tradition promises the destination of resurrection as embodied in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is a profound paradox. For if we rise after death we need not fear it, even though we do.

At the same time, our understanding of the resurrection allows us to be totally free to engage injustice. We can be completely engaged even to the point of death, without fear.[8] This eschatological understanding of the resurrection is a profoundly liberating concept in the context of justice. Yet, we still fear death because it is an unknown; it remains

[8]Cone and Chopp, op cit.

mystery. We fear the irresolvable mystery of mystery.

In the sense of the resurrection, death appears to us in life, through our experience and through our culture, as a threshold (or to some as an escape, which is still a threshold). As life appears to us to be existence, or being, death appears to be non-existence, or non-being. Whether this non-beingness is something or nothing is unknown to us in life because we only understand from the vantage of being. Life appears to be created out of non-existence and to end in non-existence. Each of those passages are thresholds.

Threshold upholds transitionality. It provides a continuum that our sense of time needs when it encounters death as an end. Life demonstrates thresholds that seem transfiguring after something dies, such as vegetation and seed and new vegetation. So we engage that transfiguring and transformative threshold in our dialogue with our own life. That understanding of a transfiguring and transforming threshold also guides our theological exploration into mystery. Just as death presents itself as a destination, so does threshold. Cultural tradition in Christianity teaches that death and threshold are one and the same. This understanding of death and threshold is critical for a social theology of transformation and reconciliation. Thresholds are the gateways of change necessary to bring about justice through transformation and reconciliation.

So we are able to envision ourselves as experiencing identities. As persons on a journey through thresholds of life. As sojourners in a life that leads to an ultimate threshold— death. A threshold that leads to something unknown, a mystery. Theologically, we are sojourners attempting to explain mystery both through the experience of mystery as death and through the experience of mystery as beyond; a beyond that appears to us as being outside the threshold of death, but also as outside us in the present, beyond the time and space of our present experience. We have looked somewhat at the mystery that death

suggests, which we can understand as the end and completion of our personal experience and existence on this planet. What I want to glimpse now is the mystery that is suggested by that which is beyond us in the "now" of our existence. This beyondness is the same mystery that we encounter at death. This beyondness is the mystical arena of God. God, the referential norm of this theological conversation.

Again, the central reference point for this aspect of mystery is the center of our experience and existence—ourselves as living individuated beings. From culture and mystery itself, we understand that mystery intrudes into experience from beyond. Mystery, or the answer to mystery, God, can appear to us as direct and unmediated, or as direct and mediated. When we experience God as direct and unmediated, that is mystical experience from God as transcendent. When we experience God as direct and mediated, that is an experience of God as spiritual and immanent.

Both transcendent and immanent experiences of God inform theological discourse because they inform experience from mystery, giving experience a sense of mystery's ultimacy. Experience attempts to translate those experiences for culture and community, which in turn informs the language into which those experiences are translated. Transcendent mystery—God from the pure and absolute beyond, and immanent mystery—God as spirit indwelling culture and experience, inform our experience. Culture informs our translation of mystery through its traditions and its language. The referential norm for mystery, as we have seen, is God; and the creative norm is language. The judgmental norm for our theological language is the culture from which that language springs.

Culture's judgmental norm—understood here to be the norm of that culture which dominates in relationship with other internal and external cultures, or the historically subjugating White norm —decides what is acceptable and unacceptable. It uses its power to name the dead if that proves necessary. It transmits and alters the language

which arises out of a common personal experience, out of our pre-language physiological and psychological structures, and their interactions with culture.[9] Culture's judgmental norm also decides what theological language looks like, and provides guidelines for what we mean when we use words like "completion," and "destination," and "justice" and "love." Culture's judgmental norm decides which behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable and defines their guidelines in community.

These norms take on structures which in turn structure experience and existence. These structures—both those of culture and those within us—interact diachronically and synchronically and thus are subject to a tension between their history and how they are viewed in the present. They are also subject to tensions within culture synchronically, tensions generated at sites of resistance.[10]

The tension between acceptability and inacceptability is the borderline between what we understand in the Christian tradition to be grace and sin, which is a provisional border, not a dictate. Because the final answer about what is acceptable and unacceptable lies in mystery, the answers we provide to resolve that tension are relative and provisional. That provisional answer between the acceptable and unacceptable we call "justice," the act of answering itself an act of justice. The call to find an answer to what is acceptable and unacceptable comes from our sense of ultimate completion, which is a call from the realm of mystery. Thus we are called from completion and mystery to be just; to decide what is acceptable and unacceptable, both within ourselves and within culture—and in the interaction between ourselves and culture, and in the interactions of culture. That which

[9]This corresponds to Ferdinand de Saussure's understanding of "langue," or the pre-language and language formative realm. See Jonathan Culler's *Ferdinand de Saussure*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), for a treatment on Saussure's thought.

[10]I am using "synchronic" in the sense of a cross-sectional "now". "Diachronic" is event to event in process, including historical, cultural and linguistic process.

continuously and oppressively impedes completion, then, is not called from completion—therefore is unjust. Methodologically, we can assume here that we are called to completion in culture through provisional acts of justice.

I want to suggest that the call to justice is also a call to love; that our sense of completion is also bound up in our sense of love as an unimpeded wholeness between our experience in existence, mystery, and culture. That which impedes the wholeness and fullness of our beings in existence and experience can be construed as unjust because it bars our completion in the wholeness of love. It is to be noted that wholeness is not just an individual concept. It is a community concept as well. It is an understanding we have in the existence we share: that within that existence is a common presence calling us all to completion. For us to be complete in each other, as one in God for all eternity, we are called to be both just and loving.[11]

Somehow, our sense of completion is also bound up with our sense of life as a series of thresholds which lead us to completion in the wholeness implied in our sense of love and justice. Inasmuch as completion resides in mystery and that love and justice are bound up in our sense of completion, then love and justice are attributes of mystery.

We have called the mystery of completion "God," therefore, the attributes of completion—justice and love—are attributes of the mystery we call God. We experience that central sense of completion both personally and communally. The wholeness and completion of our individual existence is bound up in the wholeness that we understand comes from community, from a shared presence of existence.

We are called to wholeness from transcendence, from beyond time and space. And we are called to wholeness from within the commu-

[11]Love, here, is the connecting force, the power of the integrity of God, an effortless and ultimate power.

nity of existence, from God's immanence, to which we are impelled to respond with acts of justice and love. God, therefore, is also our experience of wholeness in community. Culture provides the judgmental norms for our acts of justice and love. Mystery provides the call. We provide a provisional answer, both personally and through our praxis in the community of culture. When our actions impede justice, we impede God's call to completion in wholeness; we impede the call to completion that resides in all of God's creation and in our interactions with all of creation. This act of impedance is sin.

Now insofar as Jesus of Nazareth is concerned, Christian tradition teaches us that Jesus is the incarnation of God in human history. Jesus is transcendent God coming into existence and experience, sharing the being that humans share on this planet. According to this tradition, Jesus is the special event of God. He is an identity of God as God in humanity, but as a full humanity, nevertheless limited by human limitations and by historical and cultural limitations. God's incarnation in humanity from transcendence is the special event of Jesus.

Jesus, then, is embodied ultimate mystery coming into being as experience and existence to inform culture about God and God's call to completeness. By this incarnation through God's special event, all incarnation is touched, including our own. Methodologically, incarnation is an event we share with God as a person. By this logic, God as a person creates a tradition in culture through which we are to methodologically gauge our own experience of God from mystery and from culture. We can see in Jesus that death is a threshold. Even today we can see this. In an age in which we have the post-modern tools to annihilate all humanity. (For me, this possibility for annihilation is the threshold for the post-modern age. A threshold that finds consonance with the post-modern view we have of ourselves from outer space. Both of these are new views of ourselves as "other." They signify, as well, the emergence of a new medium of awareness—as

significant as the emergence of language in humans.)[12]

In the tradition of Jesus we see a profound and paradoxical call to justice and liberation from God. A call that tells us that we are all one in God and within humanity, and that the two are inextricably linked to completion. This call to justice from Jesus the Christ tells us that we are all in this together, linked at our personal centers to the common presence we share in God. It suggests that the problem of justice needs to be solved before completion can occur. It suggests that annihilation is not the solution to justice, but is the thwarting of God's call to completion. In this context, the call to completion can be methodologically described as salvation; salvation from the sin of injustice which carries with it the potentiality of annihilation.

How does this sense of salvation work in the context of White racism and White male oppression; in the subjugating paradigmatic understandings of White male culture? And how does it operate within a theology of transformation and reconciliation, from the three dialogical perspectives—mystery, experience, and culture? What I propose here is a radical view from the perspective of a White male who has been seeking transformation and reconciliation—or redemption—from the sin of oppression. As mentioned at the outset, White males are a long way from embracing such a radical view. Accordingly, such a theological proposition may be tantamount to a seed sown among thorns!

It can be said clearly, and has been, that North American White males avoid theological undertakings that directly answer theologies

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[12]Definitions of post-modernism abound, but including those cited within the article, I'd like to make a radical proposition that post-modernism uncludes radical transformation. By this I mean that we are in the midst of a transformation to the promised new creation: or "new being." This coming into being, if you will, is similar to the way language first emerged in humans, as a medium of communication/awareness. What the contours and coordinates of this new medium are can be see in the mystical and pentecostal awareness we have, in the understandings we have of panexperientiality and intersubjectivity.

which correctly label Whiteness and patriarchal maleness as oppressive.

But the calls by God and God's people to community and justice require White males to be involved in such an exploration for the sake of repentance, transformation, and redemption, and in order to provide a theological rationale resistant to systems of dominance, oppression, and subjugation fostered by their ancestors. This is a dominance that has most recently been critiqued by womanist, feminist, Black, other liberation and post-modern theologies.[13]

Two familiar Old Testament principles are employed in this voyage into a provisional social theology of humanity for White male oppressors. The principle of *tsedeqah*, or righteous relationship, and *mishpat*, or justice (setting right). The New Testament principle embraced by this theological conversion is the process embodied in the passion and resurrection. These three principles are foundational in Christian Scripture, yet they have been atrociously abused and appropriated by White patriarchal Christian religious hegemonies. As foundational, they are the biblical and cultural encounters necessary for a provisional White male theology of repentance, transformation, and redemption. It should be noted here that because theology has been predominantly White and male throughout history, this exploration does not presume to speak for all humans—yet it cannot avoid addressing a common oppressive humanity. This is admittedly contradictory. But if the overarching thoughts here are considered provisional and as a contribution to a dialogue on humanity, perhaps that contradictoriness can be resolved. Background to this consideration is the notion that humans share in God's image by sharing in the creation which also participates in this image. Jesus in John 14:20 said, "On that day you will know that I am in God and that God is in me

[13]These include writings by Jacquelyn Grant, J. Deotis Roberts, Delores Williams, Gayraud Wilmore, Katie Cannon, Sallie McFague, Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Reuther, James H. Evans and Ellen K. Wondra.

and I in you" (RSV, modified). Humans share in this image in mind ("for we have the mind of Christ"—1 Cor.2:16), in compassion and love, in volition, in their beingness and knowingness, in their lovingness and doingness, and in their relatedness. They also share in it through their deaths—eschatologically—for it is through their deaths that they participate in the eschaton, in the end of time, and in eternity. It is through their deaths that they can participate in the cross and resurrection. These are all provisional identifications of the image that humans share, for who can know that image in creation except by those aspects of human that have been formed in and are influenced by creation—that is through mystery, experience, and culture?

God participates in the human in a special way, however, a way that is distinctively human. The human image of God which is love participates in God as love. The human image of God which is mind, participates in God which is mind. The image of God in humans which is will participates in God's will. The image of God in humans which is the ongoing creation itself is the creation in which humans participate. Humans also participate in the image of God through human community; in the wholeness of God through the wholeness of community; the intersubjectivity of community. As such, God's image is in human relationship. Communities can manifest the image of God as wholeness just as individual humans can. Communities can also manifest the other images mentioned here. Thus as humans, we know, through communities and our personal selves, that we are in relationship. As participants in time, we understand that we share in eternity. Thus as a community we are in relationship together forever. We are the community of the present—the particular community and the global community—and yet we share in the eternal community. We are in this together, forever, with the people of the present and the people of all time, all of us.

Humans have also been given the freedom of choice, the background of the image of God which is liberation, freedom. Humans, however, can choose to turn away from God and assume a Godness unto themselves—assume a self-righteousness, a role in creation that is exploitative, damaging, and enslaving. Enigmatically, this is a turning away from God to a human-centeredness, a cultural egotism. But because creation itself has an apparent randomness and is subject to laws of probability, it would be unwise for humans to say they are the only participants in creation that are free to choose. Humans occupy only an infinitesimal corner of creation and cannot presume to know what goes on in the rest of God's creation.

Moreover, as humans with choice and as humans who share in eternity, our choices ripple, however minutely, throughout eternity. It is my understanding that *tsedeqah* and *mishpat* are eternal imperatives for humans. Human creation is not fulfilled and resolved until *mishpat* and *tsedeqah* are wholly actualized. Turning away from justice and righteousness, therefore, constitutes turning away from God, turning to human selfishness, thus creating a conflict in community and culture, within the self, and with God. It is this sin, this turning away from God and the mystery of God to a human centeredness in which White male oppressors and White racists have fully participated and continue to participate, both as persons and as community. It is in this context that a provisional theology of White racial repentance, transformation, and redemption is explored.

Whiteness and White maleness have been and are egregious impediments to community, to *tsedeqah*. To achieve *mishpat*, or justice, White oppressors have to undergo the passion, that is, White oppressors seeking redemption have to enter the garden of agony and take on the sins of their Whiteness and White maleness. In a sense, they need to be deconstructed in passion, in lamentation, in surrender. Their self-justifying thought and rationality needs to be dismantled

deconstructively, in the passion of agony, embodied in the moans of the oppressed, the groans that arise from our common Spirit, the rebellions and angry cries for justice. White oppressors need to see themselves and their hegemonic systems as signifiers of misery, of oppression, and as signifiers of their own oppressive self-righteousness. They do this in the garden of agony, the first stage of entering the abyss of their Whiteness. This has to be a true, full-blown face-to-face encounter with the "other," not a masochistic wallowing in self-justifying shame and guilt. Part of the agony involves relinquishing power, the power to subjugate and dominate, and the power to name what is unacceptable, and what will not be.

What happens here are three crises: (1) an ontological crisis; (2) a relational crisis; (3) an epistemological crisis. The ontological crisis involves the crisis of being a White oppressor, that being a White oppressor means being named as evil, or in sin. The relational crisis is understanding what being a White oppressor is and means in community and culture. It is understanding that White oppression is synonymous with broken community. The epistemological crisis is the discovery that White oppressors' assumptions about themselves, their knowledge, and the world, are deeply and perhaps irrevocably flawed. These crises are set against the background of the cross.

It is my thesis that the ontological crisis is of such a magnitude (i.e., that White oppressive dominance is so globally pervasive and pernicious), that only an encounter with the cross will suffice. White oppression needs to die to itself, to its sin. It needs to cease to exist, to be thoroughly expunged, to totally relinquish itself on the cross. To name itself as dead. Those who accept a place on the cross then need to descend into the abyss and be judged. To undergo *mishpat*, as near as it can be understood to come from God and from God's mystery.

Those in the abyss, having attempted to understand and undergo *mishpat*, then need to seek an understanding and an embodiment of

the incarnation, the *imago Dei*—individually, relationally, in all that involves thought. In the abyss they need to repent and seek redemption in and from the Christ of All People, the common incarnation we share in existence. They need to pray that the Christ of All People will welcome them through the resurrection, in the rebirth. They need to surrender to that rebirth in the common Christ we share in experience and culture.

Those of Whiteness and White maleness, being what they are, however, (that is being oppressively deceitful and self-deceptive) cannot assume rebirth and resurrection on their own. That would be White appropriation. They can, however, assume a provisional sense of dignity. The dignity that comes from the surrender to the cross of One Who Calls Wholeness From All. The Christ of Hope—God's call to completion. They can assume the dignity of hope that they have an identity in God. What this identity is, however, can only be provisional, an epistemological wager. In a post-modern sense, the emerging males and recovering racists are still white-skinned, but they have within them the realization of contradiction, a double contradiction. They are White and are seen as White, yet they are being transformed into something different from what they were before (as in Polanyi's emergence),[14] a new creation, a provisional creation seeking a contingent identity. This identity can only be contingent and must remain so, otherwise the emerging males and recovering racists will be in danger of slipping back into Whiteness and White maleness—seizing power for White-defined ends.

This encounter with their White racism and White maleness alone is still not enough. *Tsedeqah* awaits. There is still the call to commu-

[14]Jerry T. Gill, in *Mediated Transcendence: A Postmodern Reflection* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989) summarizes Michael Polanyi's understanding of emergence on pp. 28-31. See also, Michael Polani, *Knowing and Being*, ed. Marjorie Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 134-7.

nity.

It is here that the notion of provisionality and contradiction is paramount for the recovering White racists because they still bear the stain, the mark of Whiteness, and thus of White racism. Nevertheless, they need to be in community, to find a way back to community, but not on their former White male or White racist terms—on the whole community's terms, the redemptive and prophetic community in praxis.[15] To begin to dictate terms for their restoration to community would be to slide back into Whiteness and to oppressive maleness. This they need to resist with all their mind, heart and strength, keeping the cross and the abyss before them as a symbol of their judgment and transformation.

They need also to actively engage with those in resistance to the oppression that continues, an oppression that is still guided by the dominating and subjugating paradigms of Whiteness and White maleness. In a sense, the only thing that remains for the emerging males and recovering racists at this point is an acceptance of their provisionality. Who they are and what their power is remains to be defined in their relationship with community—in *tsedeqah*—and who they are in resistance to the remaining dominating systems and attitudes that embody and take on the ways of oppressive White males. Therefore, it is through these three: the passion, *mishpat* and *tsedeqah*, that White males can attempt to participate again in God's people, in God's creation, and in God's image, provisionally assuming a new identity. But this is only a provisional identity, a provisional name, and can remain only provisional.

To conclude, I have attempted to describe briefly here a provisional theology of reconciliation, transformation and redemption from the perspectives of mystery, experience, and culture. We who are Whites,

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[15]I rely on the notion of praxis here as the applicable and appropriate response; that is, an interactive action/reflection dialogical and creative, mutually derived response.

and males—and who belong to and have been influenced by a racist, dominating culture—must see ourselves theologically as experiencing identities which need to die to racist and male oppressive ways and to relational paradigms. The cultural paradigms for repentance, transformation, and reconciliation can be found in our Christian tradition and Scripture, and need to be engaged.

Repentance, transformation, and reconciliation are intrinsic within the concepts of *tsedeqah*, *mishpat*, and in the death and resurrection of our human model of the divine—Jesus the Christ. The call to repentance, transformation and reconciliation comes to us today as a call from the oppressed to justice, a call from those who have been the victims of White racism and White hegemonic oppression. This call is also God's call to wholeness and completion. Re-entrance into community is the next step, guided by mystery, experience, and culture.

I believe that it is at this point that those who hold the power to continue racism must be engaged, but non-violently, as the historical Jesus engaged the oppression of his time. In a sense, this is a taking of power to name the dead away from the oppressive human tyrant and giving it to those in resistance. I name myself as dead by being in solidarity with Jesus' death, with the death of the oppressed, and with those who have placed their own lives on the line in non-violent resistance. This sets the stage for a redemptive engagement against the full thrust of political and economic oppression and tyranny, because it nullifies death's subjugating power at a site of resistance. This engagement, unfortunately, is global, because in this post-modern age, economic and political (including governmental) domination and tyranny have become paradigmatic in the global human relationship. The global hegemony is anti-God because it marginalizes millions and leaves millions bereft of human dignity in God. Thus, it is sin. It thwarts God's call to completeness in love and justice. The test of reconciliation and redemption is the struggle against this tyrannical sin.

Timothy J. Johnson*

The Black Church As An Afrocentric Institution

Introduction

The Black Church in America continues to occupy a place of centrality and influence in African American communities. Proponents and detractors alike agree that it is epochal, spanning the long period of the beginning of North American slavery to the present time. While there is little doubt about its influence in shaping the African American community, honest critics admit that both psychological wellness and dysfunction have co-existed in this one institution. Little has changed since 1933, when Carter Woodson wrote of the Black Church's valuable contribution to the "Negro race," its unrealized potential, its divisiveness, its Black-on-Black exploitation, and its control by Whites (Woodson, 1969). The Black Church continues to be an ambivalent institution, uncertain of its relationship or mission to African Americans in the latter 20th century.

The Black Church as an Afrocentric institution is posited as the prototypical model which will endure because of its relevance to Black culture and realities which define the lives of African Americans. While the amount of pathology and dysfunction varies from church to church and, therefore, cannot be quantified, we state as axiomatic that the degree to which a Black church is removed from the culture and realities of African Americans is the same degree by which it impacts negatively upon the mental health of its members.

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