

Is God a White Racist?

by Carolyn R. Brown

Humanocentric theism “provides a consistent framework for accommodating the freedom of [humanity], an indispensable ingredient of a theology of liberation.” It traces the cause of racism to human forces. It removes a theological and moral escape often used by the white oppressor. “He can no longer point to anything but [humans] as the sustaining force behind racism.” The implications of this are far reaching in that they put the responsibility on both blacks and whites to recognize our potential to create freedom and transform power, which might actually end oppression.

The Rev. Dr. William R. Jones is rarely the first name to come to mind when we speak of theologians. Most people think of Karl Barth or Paul Tillich. Unitarian Universalists may know of Henry Nelson Wieman, but few know of Jones, who is the author of a book by the same title as this article. Jones graduated from Howard University, went on to receive his Master of Divinity degree at Harvard, and his PhD in Religious Studies at Brown University. Ordained as a UU minister in June, 1958, he served as an assistant minister for several years before his long academic career at Florida State University. I had the opportunity to talk to Dr. Jones at a graduation service for Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California.

His writing is rigorous, analytical, systematic theology leading to liberation with a religious humanist leaning. His 1973 book examines the work of five leading black theologians, all allegedly working on a theology of black liberation. Jones felt that they could not talk about liberation without dealing with his question: Is God a white racist? In fact, he asserts, “black theology is incompatible with liberation theology.”¹ Theology must look at the cause of evil and suffering (theodicy) before it can deal with the hope for liberation, and Jones ends his book with a discussion that moves towards a “Black Theodicy for Today.”²

Jones argues that theodicy is the central category we must consider as we try to answer the question, Is God A White Racist? He writes: “‘divine racism’ surfaces whenever a specific type of suffering, which I identify as ethnic suffering, is joined with particular interpretations of God’s sovereignty over human history and His activity within human history or both.”³ “Ethnic suffering” features mal-distribution, negative quality, enormity and non-catastrophic character, that is, it is spread over centuries. It is not equally suffered by the entire human race, but is concentrated in a particular ethnic group. Ethnic suffering has no essential value for man’s salvation or well being and leads away from one’s highest good.⁴

Under the traditional theology of Christianity, the cause of suffering is usually quite clearly part of the plan for us. “Theodicy is more than the attempt to exonerate and justify God’s purpose and works in the face of contrary evidence. There is another dimension; for instance, a concern to determine the cause of suffering. In fact every apologetic approach to human suffering is at the same time an implicit conclusion about the cause or origin of suffering.”⁵ No apology, no theodicy can escape this conclusion.

Black theology promotes a concept of God as omni-benevolent, One who cares for us and will reward us in heaven, which is the teaching of the Baptist church where Jones grew up and later entered the ministry. The theology he affirmed as a young Baptist minister, which he now calls “Whiteanity,” preached “the harder the cross, the brighter the crown.”⁶

It makes no sense to expect that a benevolent God will give extra rewards to those he causes to suffer more than others. “To talk about the saving work of God is to presuppose a conclusion about the benevolence of God; it is to assert the essential goodness of God in spite of the prior “evil” that makes his “saving” work necessary. In sum, salvation is meaningless without the prior affirmation of God’s benevolence toward man.”⁷

In place of the traditional views of God’s benevolence, Jones offers a *humanocentric theism* and “*secular*” *humanism*. “The essential feature of both is the advocacy of the functional ultimacy of man. Man must act as if he were the ultimate valuator or the ultimate agent in human history or both. Thus God’s responsibility for the crimes and errors of human history is reduced if not effectively eliminated.”⁸

The argument Jones makes is important, for many churches today are still preaching that this life is the “cross” we must bear and that we will wear a “brighter crown” in the hereafter. The question is whether this idea of evil and suffering is an impediment in the lives of those who accept it as part of their faith.

Jones’ book was largely shunned by his fellow black theologians. His frustration at that time was that he shared the same goals of all his colleagues, “finding an effective way for black America to affirm its humanity in an environment of racial oppression.”⁹ Jones believes that the black church and black Christianity are a form of “mis-religion”¹⁰ that fulfills a vital role in keeping blacks oppressed. He challenges as flawed the twin claims that “though blacks accepted the white man’s religion, “they recreated and remolded it to fit their ‘own peculiar needs,’ and that “the black man’s pilgrimage in America was made less onerous because of his religion.”¹¹

He writes of his struggle with the “eleventh commandment: ”Thou shalt not ignore the basic tenets of Judeo-Christian faith. To do so would be merely to establish a folk religion that would not survive the test of history... and the black man will have lost the God who brought him over so many difficult places in the past.”¹² Considering statements such as these and looking at the reality of history, he grew increasingly suspicious of the culpability of the black church and black theology in keeping oppression alive.

Jones asks: “On what grounds can the black theologian affirm that God’s activity will be different in the future—i.e., effecting the liberation of blacks—when the present and past history of blacks is oppression?”¹³ If one keeps the traditional concept of a liberating God, one must ask these questions: Why does the evil and concomitant suffering of blacks continue? What kind of liberation is this?

To avoid the contradiction, he urges black theologians to consider *humanocentric theism* as the solution. Since black religion is fundamentally theistic, there must remain some reference to this foundational concept. What must change is the idea that God is responsible for human history. Only in this way can the charge of divine racism be avoided.

Traditional or “theocentric theism would argue for God’s controlling and overruling sovereignty over the essential aspects of the human situation, especially human destiny.”¹⁴ Humanocentric theism assigns an exalted status to man, particularly to human freedom, which Jones writes “conforms to God’s ultimate purpose and plan for mankind.”¹⁵ He cites the writings of Martin Buber, which point to our “codetermining power”¹⁶ by virtue of our creation. Being a codetermining power is intrinsic to our being. This points up the necessity for the activity and choice if we are going to reach our full potentials.

The writings of Harvey Cox in *Secular City* also support humanocentric theism. Cox contends that we are in command of nature, and it is certainly true that we have the power to destroy, whether we can do otherwise remains to be seen. Politics depend upon our power, and

we are responsible for human values. We are the ultimate power relative to values and history. Cox asks the question: Is God simply another way of talking about man? Another question could be in what sense, if any, does God retain a veto power over man?¹⁷

Humanocentric theism is the proposal that humans are co-creators of the essential features of our existence, which depend upon our activity, choice, and freedom, in concert with a reinterpretation of divine sovereignty and omnipotence that allow for this. A sort of hands off divinity who served only as the efficient cause or originator of all.

This complex of ideas is so closely related to religious humanism that one can find few differences besides some key words that admit to an acceptance of some starting point for the universe. In the later edition of his book (1998) Jones corrects his position to that of a *religious humanist*. We can understand what a drastic step acknowledging this theological position would present to traditional churches. It's even a difficult step for some Unitarian Universalists to take.

Humanocentric theism "provides a consistent framework for accommodating the freedom of [humanity], an indispensable ingredient of a theology of liberation."¹⁸ It traces the cause of racism to human forces. It removes a theological and moral escape often used by the white oppressor. "He can no longer point to anything but [humans] as the sustaining force behind racism."¹⁹ The implications of this are far reaching in that they put the responsibility on both blacks and whites to recognize our potential to create freedom and transform power, which might actually end oppression.

Humanocentric theism could become an effective remedy for *quietism*, the attitude of accepting evil and suffering in hopes of a better life after death. "The oppressed, in part, are oppressed precisely because they buy, or are indoctrinated to accept, a set of beliefs that negate those attitudes and actions necessary for liberation. Accordingly, the purpose and first step of a theology of liberation is to effect a radical conversion of the mind of the oppressed, to free his/her mind from those destructive and enslaving beliefs that stifle the movement toward liberation."²⁰

Both secular and religious humanists agree that "the actual character of human history is the product of human choices and actions. Human progress or moral improvement is not assured, particularly where black prospects are at stake. Black hope may run afoul of the changing and adapting forms of racism in the future."²¹ Jones states that "the cherished beliefs of black people are in fact part and parcel of their oppression!"²²

Humanocentric theism, secular or religious humanism all face the same challenge. They agree that history is the result of human actions, even for those who still believe there is a God out there. Process theology and the rational empiricists tell us that good only happens if we do it. Jones' book makes clear to me at least, that the traditional concept of a sovereign, benevolent God *must* include divine racism. God is a white racist. Such statements can also be made regarding the centuries of suffering of the Jewish people.

We cannot convince those who choose to continue to survive under a theocentric theism that they are missing something. Lerone Bennet's challenge to black religion is "to think with our eyes... to abandon the partial frame of reference of our oppressor and to create... concepts that release our reality."²³

If we have codetermining power, and I believe we do, in fact I believe that only by human actions will anything come to fruition in human history; we are responsible for continuing the work our Association has been doing for the past fifty years. We are called to be world-changers. We are called to end oppression. We are called to work against those who would limit

the possibilities available for all people. We are called to be the power that embraces liberation rather than mere survival for all people.

Notes

¹ William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1998, p. x.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 169ff.

³ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21-22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 214.