

Is "The Living God" a Theological Category?

The sequence of titles for these Institutes—"The Finality of Christ" in 1965 and now "The Living God"—has more than accidental significance. It means that a theology must follow rather than precede a Christology. The attempt to invert the usual order, however, provokes a crisis not only in Christian theology but in the whole life of the church.

Process Theology and Radical Theology

Contemporary theological discussion of God seems to move in one of two channels. One of these is known as "process theology," which is trying to recreate a natural theology in relation to which a more specifically *Christian* theology can be worked out. The other is known as "radical theology," which has grown largely from the Barthian emphasis on the total transcendence of God. It confronts the matrix of problems expressed in the slogan "God is dead." Process theology has trouble in moving beyond its first volume on God to a genuine Christology which is something other than a historical illustration of its God-talk.

Let us examine these two problems more carefully. Process theology recognizes that if theology is to be done at all in its traditional form (God the creator, redeemer, and sanctifier), a God-category must be established with which it can work. This God-category is given content and significance not simply from biblical and traditional materials but from the total culture out of which it arises, including that culture's scientific understand-

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ing. Thus, the term "God" carries meaning insofar as it is grounded in what the people of a culture at large are able to accept as true and valid. By its very existence, this God-category fulfills an apologetic function for the Christian, creating the overall form—either of an oblong blur or a detailed structure—within which he can interpret the meaning of Christ.¹ Various philosophers and theologians in our day, including F. S. C. Northrop, Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, Schubert M. Ogden, and John B. Cobb, Jr., who participated in the last Institute,² have addressed this problem. Bishop Robinson, too, holds that unless the term "God" can be given a content, it becomes meaningless to say, "God was in Christ."³ And Wolfhart Pannenberg has pointed out that both the history of Israel and Greek speculation have provided the kind of reference which gave significance to Christian claims concerning Jesus of Nazareth.⁴

Having said this, there is little more to be said. The kind of God open enough to include the revelation in Jesus Christ really needs no Christology to complement his theology—the Christology only illustrates what has already been said.⁵ And the kind of God who needs a Christology to mediate his absoluteness is one whom no mediator can really approach. In other words, either volume two on Christology is not needed because everything is already contained in volume one, or else volume two needs to be augmented by volumes three, four, five, six—ad infinitum—because none can really bridge the gap between God and the world or between God and man. Each successive volume is another putting off of the question until finally it is left in the hands not of the theologian but of the pastor and layman who must somehow incorporate their Christian faith in their life in the world. Thus Schubert M. Ogden at the conclusion of a major essay on "What Does It Mean to Affirm, 'Jesus Christ

¹ Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God* (New York: Harper, 1966), p. 6.

² John B. Cobb, Jr., "The Finality of Christ in Whiteheadian Perspective," in *The Finality of Christ*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966), pp. 122-54.

³ John A. T. Robinson, *Exploration into God* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. v.

⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, in association with R. Rendtorff, U. Wilckens, T. Rendtorff. 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), pp. 103 ff.

⁵ Ogden, *The Reality of God*, p. 203.

Is Lord'?" writes, "Ideally, what should be done now is to spell out the implications of this affirmation for the Christian's life in the church and in the world. But this is a task that falls outside the limits of the present essay."⁶

The other pole of the dilemma is to reject all natural theology as Barth and his colleagues have tried to do and to deal with God only as he is revealed in Jesus Christ. This means that theologies of the usual sort, creating a God-category out of available cultural materials, are perhaps culturally interesting but not Christianly significant. One is no nearer to understanding the meaning of Jesus Christ by being a believer in the Neoplatonic or Aristotelian or Thomist or any other God than by being an unbeliever in any one or all of them. Against Brunner, Barth argued that it was no harder to believe Christianly in our time than in any other time and that proclamation of the gospel did not depend upon some prior stage of "removing impediments to belief" or of creating an atmosphere in which God-talk of the usual kind could be accepted.⁷ By rejecting the human religious a priori Barth understood himself to be rejecting the more subjective course theology had taken since Schleiermacher and thereby opening the way to a true theology of the Word, Jesus Christ.

As I have shown elsewhere,⁸ this is one of the most important roots of contemporary radical theology which has suggested doing away with the category of God altogether in its exposition of the Christian faith. True enough, there are other roots of this movement—modern science, historicism, nihilism, and the impotence of the church in face of social problems; but these same influences were by no means absent from Barth either. The difficulty with this position is that in spite of protests to the contrary, the God of no given culture tends to bless the absolutizing of the contemporary culture, whatever that might be. Perhaps even the Barthian God with his Hegelian overtones is uniquely a God of the then contemporary world in all its bafflement and uncertainty. The secularization which in the

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. G. T. Thompson. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), Sec. 2.1, p. 29.

⁸ Paul Hessert, "Barthianische Wurzeln der 'Radical-Theology'" in *Theologie zwischen Gestern und Morgen*, ed. Wilhelm Dantine and Kurt Lüthi (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1968).

beginning had come from the denial of the religious a priori becomes itself a new idolatry and a new cult, complete with ritual and priesthood. The Christianity attached to it looks more and more like another form of *Volkreligion*.

An Approach Through the Mediator

There is little possibility of resolving this kind of polarity: one must make up his mind where he stands and in which direction he intends to move. But there is an approach which can make the problem more explicit. This is to come to the God-question through the mediator rather than through the polarity calling for mediation. If we have no direct access to God, then theology can only focus on the mediator to God.

Various things have, indeed, served as mediators between man and what ultimately has been his source of understanding and meaning. Reason may well come first to mind—the rational attempt to bring together in an overall scheme the permanent and the changing, eternity and time, God and man. Human significance is found in the ability of mind to trace and express the order of things. But Feuerbach pointed out that the God of reason is only another way of speaking of the divinization of reason itself: the mediator has become the god.⁹

Another possibility has been nature, as our own Declaration of Independence indicates—"nature and nature's God." Man is related to God through nature. John Wesley as well as Deists could thus speak of nature's God. But being related to God through nature is to make man's relation to nature of ultimate significance.

A third possibility is history. Here providence becomes the godhead, and in the course of events themselves is to be found their meaning. A more explicit statement of this premise can hardly be found than that given by Professor Gordon Kaufman in his new *Systematic Theology*: "The ultimate arbiter of theological validity is not reason or experience or the Bible or the church, but the movement of history itself—understood theologically: the providence of God. It is this movement which in

⁹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper, 1957), pp. 35-37.

actual fact sorts out the valid from the invalid, the significant from the insignificant."¹⁰

Other possibilities are feeling, as with Schleiermacher (and then Feuerbach's comment about the divinization of feeling applies), or the existential experience of faith itself in face of a meaning-denying universe.

The point to be made in all these cases is that the mediator becomes the god. If nature is the mediator, the god mediated is nature's god. If reason is the mediator, the god mediated is reason's god. If history is the mediator, then the god mediated is history's god. Reason is not the mediator of nature's god unless reason has mistakenly capitulated to nature or nature has been squeezed into the mold of reason. Eighteenth-century thought illustrates this conflict: Bishop Butler's apology for Christianity was that the god to be seen in nature by the truly observant is much closer to the God of the Bible than to the god of deistic rational theology.¹¹ In a similar way, reason is not the mediator to history's god unless, as with Hegel, reason has itself become historical or history has become rational.

The mediator defines the god! This means that if Jesus Christ is taken as mediator, then God is defined by him and not by nature, reason, history, or even existential faith. But if something else fulfills this mediatorial function, then it becomes the hermeneutical principle by which Jesus himself is interpreted. With the mediation of reason, Jesus Christ himself becomes reason, the *logos*; with the mediation of nature he becomes the "omega point of creation"; with the mediation of history he becomes the "hinge of history." That by which he is interpreted and understood is truly the mediator and determines the god. This interpretation, then, is *illustrated* by him: he is the God-Man (in various recensions); he is the lawgiver, the savior, the rebel, the sacrificial victim, the man for others, and so forth. The Gospel accounts are read in this light.

Throughout Christian history there has always been tension between the impetus of Jesus Christ and various cultural gods, no matter how refined. Such tension has meant considerable qualification of whatever elements of the culture have been appropriated by Christian theology: Thomas is not simply Ar-

¹⁰ Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner's, 1968), p. xv.

¹¹ Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion* (New York: Ungar, 1961).

istotelian, Augustine not simply Neoplatonic, Pannenberg not simply Hegelian. And beyond such qualification, this tension has been the source of the recalcitrant theological problems remaining when the last sentence of each system has been closed. If in our time we try to come to terms more directly with Jesus Christ as mediator, it is not as though we were attempting something novel for which we had first to clear away everything that had gone before. It simply sets the dimensions of our own theological problem.

Christ the Mediator

One might say that to speak of Jesus Christ the mediator is to commit oneself to a *historical* exposition of Christian faith. But the word "historical" is ambiguous—not just in the scholarly distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, but in the confusion between dealing with concrete acts and dealing with an abstract "essence" of those acts, the difference between history and historicity. What many speak of as history is simply an inverted or introverted version of Neoplatonic metaphysics—that is, the eternal pulsation of the One is seen in the psyche rather than in the cosmos. Jesus Christ the mediator is mediation in action, not mediation by nature, essence, or principle. Of course, one can always raise the question of "being" as the ground of "doing," but to be committed to mediation in action is to refuse to make the doing no more than a showing forth of something real whether it is shown forth or not, or to find its reality on some level or in some dimension other than its being shown forth. One can extract a "principle of historicity" from history; but then what started out as historical—that is, dealing with movement, decision, consequence, opportunity—has become essential though disguised in historical terms.

This is to say that Jesus Christ is not an insight which, when recognized, transforms all reality by casting a different light on it.¹² Rather, Jesus Christ is an action, a quite specific action which has projected a different history—a different course of events—than there otherwise would have been. Those who are his disciples are involved in this action. They continue it.

¹² Compare Kaufman, *Systematic Theology*, p. 73: "If the Christ event is to be grasped as God's definitive revelatory act, it must be seen as illumining every dimension of self and world."

The particularity of this action is described by the biblical accounts, by the complex tradition of the church through the centuries, and by the responsible wrestling with problems of contemporary discipleship. Frequently it must be described in opposition to other courses of action, not because the actions themselves are necessarily diametrically opposed, but because understanding requires a sharpening of issues which in their concreteness are never that clear.

Take a specific example from our time which can serve as a base from which our discussion can move. In the face of social, economic, and political problems young people the world over are giving themselves to direct political action. Christian young people, caught up in the same problems and in the same general approach to them, and moved by their religious training which they are determined shall be more than hypocritical piety, project for themselves the model of Jesus the zealot. Jesus the zealot is concerned for the oppressed and downtrodden but realistic enough to know that any amelioration of human need comes through use of power. He is devoted enough to his cause to risk all for it. Since appeal to man's better nature is an unrealistic response to power structures and therefore irresponsible, it is held, Jesus the zealot organizes such force as he can (moral, economic, political, and even military) and applies it to accomplish his goals. Prior to launching a major revolution, he arranges "confrontations" with authorities which demonstrate the critical condition of the times and by a polarizing process consolidate his followers and commit them to action. His tragic death thus demonstrates the corruption and bankruptcy of the established order and provides his followers with a better understanding of the task lying before them. So much for the history of Jesus of Nazareth interpreted by the hermeneutic of today's youth revolt.

To be his follower today means the same sort of confrontation policy in behalf of his concerns. The confrontations thus will challenge the established order and for the sake of certain goals will unite disparate social elements into a common revolutionary front. To be his follower means to endorse the demands of those who speak for the poor and to buttress this endorsement with action to force a reordering of the total society.

In this program there is, first, the basic picture of Jesus the zealot and, second, the updating of political realism so far as

technique is concerned. The question whether Jesus himself took a certain kind of action is held to be irrelevant because Jesus, it is said, had to work within the limits of his own time, his own outlook, and his own resources. We must work with ours. What we share in common is concern with the oppressed and a determination to address their need in relevant social action.

But let us now examine the kind of mediation which Jesus the zealot has provided and feel out the kind of God he has mediated. This mediation is the successful historical movement, and its god is historical success as measured by prevailing ideas of what constitutes the good life. Its image comes only in part from the Gospels themselves and largely from a contemporary social and historical outlook concomitant with the mass social engineering that we have known since the nineteenth century. This is the truth which is endorsed, and Jesus seen in this light is Jesus the zealot, as students from Reimarus to Schonfield¹³ have shown. History has usurped the role of mediator and has turned theology into an apology for revolution. In the particularization of contemporary "Christian" action, biblical accounts and the tradition of the church have been overruled by a preoccupation with contemporary solutions. Jesus the zealot, unlike the Jesus of Mark, can neither turn the crowds away nor turn away from them. This would be "irresponsible." If they represent power, he must be their leader. A disciple of Jesus the zealot could have only scorn for the Jesus of Mark's or the other Gospels.

Jesus the zealot is not the only example we could draw from the contemporary scene, not even the only example we could draw from the mediation of historical success. And even Jesus the zealot can be cast in conservative or reactionary forms as well as revolutionary ones. The theological point in any case would be the same. The choice of mediator is the critical choice!

Some Contemporary Wrestling with Jesus Christ the Mediator

Of the many attempts today to deal with the concrete historical mediation of Jesus Christ through Gospel materials, I should like to examine three briefly. Their intention is to make the historical mediator not some immanent principle of history it-

¹³ Hugh Joseph Schonfield, *The Passover Plot* (London: Hutchinson, 1965).

self but the particular kind of ministry of a historical person. They come from three different parts of the world. From present-day America is James Cone's black theology; from Great Britain, John J. Vincent's radical Christocentricity, and from Japan, Kazoh Kitamori's theology of the pain of God.

a) *Jesus Christ in Black Theology*. The situation out of which black theology comes and to which it speaks is complex and easily distorted. Furthermore, it is still in formative stages, emerging from more familiar theologies, struggling for identity, and developing critical canons for itself. My citations are from the recent book *Black Theology and Black Power* by James H. Cone, professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

Cone begins significantly with a discussion of Black Power, the contemporary American phenomenon, and then relates this to the Christian gospel. Black Power is the refusal of the black man to be treated as anything less than a man. It is "an *attitude*, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness."¹⁴ Although black hatred of whites is endemic in America today, Cone says this hatred is not racist since it has nothing to do with the superiority of one race over another but derives from the historical situation of specific white injustice to blacks. The only living options to the black man today are protest or accommodation, and Black Power is the determination to be free. "If whites do not get off the backs of blacks, they must expect that blacks will literally throw them off by whatever means are at their disposal. This is the meaning of Black Power. Depending on the response of whites, it means that emancipation may even have to take the form of outright rebellion. No one can really say what form the oppressed must take in relieving their oppression."¹⁵

Thus far, Black Power is the expression of a certain historically defined social revolution. What is its connection with Christianity? "Christianity is not alien to Black Power," says Cone; "it is Black Power."¹⁶ "The task of Black Theology, then, is to analyze the black man's condition in light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding

¹⁴ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people, to destroy racism."¹⁷ This identification of Christianity and Black Power comes about because *black* is now interpreted to mean the suffering and oppressed wherever they are found. The gospel, then, "is a message about the ghetto, and all other injustices done in the name of democracy and religion to further the social, political, and economic interests of the oppressor. In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair. Through Christ the poor man is offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes him other than human."¹⁸ Again, "But whether whites want to hear it or not, *Christ is black, baby*, with all of the features which are so detestable to white society."¹⁹ "To be Christian is to be one of those whom God has chosen. God has chosen black people!"²⁰ It is in this sense of black as oppressed and white as oppressor in general that Cone can speak of a black man in white skin and a white man in black skin, because "to be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are."²¹ On the cross, Christ dies as the affirmation of himself. He refuses to submit to the oppressor's terms: in Christ one can glory in being black. In fact, one can enter into relation with God only through the black brother who is the manifestation of God's presence on earth.²²

Although black means the oppressed, Christ's righteousness means the vindication of suffering, and for Cone this means putting an end to suffering in victory over the oppressor. Whoever fights for the poor fights for God. This fight justifies whatever is necessary to carry it on effectively, including violence against the oppressor's violence.²³ The harshest words of the book are reserved for not only the "pie in the sky by and by" theology, but any capitulation to a "not yet." Cone is adamant against all talk of a powerless Christ, in radical contrast to

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 117. Italics are Cone's.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68. Italics are Cone's.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Bonhoeffer.²⁴ "Love without power to guarantee justice in human relations is meaningless."²⁵ "Powerlessness breeds a race of beggars."²⁶ Although he refers to Barth's warning against identifying our own interests with God's and finding God only in those activities which serve our purposes, he interprets this as a warning against individual selfishness as against the cause of the group, in this case, the black righteous cause.

On the one hand vindication by God of the sufferer, the black, can mean his refusal to be pauperized by poverty in all its psychological and social dimensions. The black Christ then dies in his affirmation of his and his neighbors' manhood: "when black people say Yes to their humanity by affirming their blackness, we must conclude that the affirmation was made possible through God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ."²⁷ On the other hand, vindication may mean turning the tables with new structures of power. "But we can be certain that black patience has run out, and unless white America responds positively to the theory and activity of Black Power, then a bloody, protracted civil war is inevitable. . . . The decision lies with white America and not least with white Americans who speak the name of Christ."²⁸ It would seem that the black would lose his theological identity as the oppressed one just in his vindication.

Cone several times returns to the question of how such a stance reflects what we know of Jesus through the Gospels. He insists that Jesus of Nazareth cannot be normative for our time. He warns us of literalism: "We cannot solve ethical questions of the twentieth century by looking at what Jesus did in the first."²⁹ To look for a guide in Jesus is to deny the freedom of the Christian man: "*His only point of reference* is the freedom granted in Christ to be all for the neighbor."³⁰ Any attempt

²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 219-20. Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, *The Nature of Faith*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 134: "To confess God's omnipotence at the cross of Jesus is to know what omnipotence really is."

²⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 53.

²⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140. Italics are mine.

to ponder right and wrong in terms of law is simply Pharisaism, he says.

b) *Radical Christocentricity*. Another approach to God through Christ is taken by John J. Vincent who acknowledges that he belongs with the radical theologians but not of the "death of God" kind. Whereas many, building on the death of God phenomenon, tend to absolutize contemporary culture, Vincent tries to avoid this by building christocentrically, not on Paul's Christology, but on the Gospels. The "divine" actions of Christ constitute his messiahship, Vincent says, are all hidden within the ordinary daily life of the world. If they had some outward identification, they would constitute a category of their own. Instead, they are Jesus' deeds in the battle for human existence and wholeness. "Jesus is the secular activity of the hidden God."³¹ "There is, then, a secular Christ. But the secular Christ exists in his own right and not merely because modern man thinks he seeks him. There is a secular Christ, but this is not at all the kind of Christ that modern secular man maps out for himself when he seeks to create a Christ after his own image."³²

Vincent is fighting on two fronts at once. On the one hand, he is attacking supernaturalism in both orthodox and modern forms which sets a super-history over against regular history or an inward, personal history over against world history. In either case, there is nothing to be said to *our* world. On the other hand, he repudiates the various humanistic or naturalistic schemes which lack direction and critical evaluation, stressing the Christian's "openness" to whatever may come. The Christian is not completely open to everything, Vincent says: he is committed to a ministry of reconciliation which he finds in the Jesus of the Gospels, for it is here that he finds the hidden God even though he understands that this God is hidden in his own world as well. Through the Gospel Christ he learns to focus on the deeds of forgiveness and healing. "God is not a God of providence," he writes, "but One who ranges himself in Jesus against all that robs man of wholeness and so actively

³¹ John J. Vincent, *Secular Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), pp. 88-89.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 123.

works for man's well being."³³ But this work is within the "apparently secular, selfish, political, or mercenary actions."

Vincent is suspicious of any doctrine of the cross that makes salvation some eternal transaction or part of "God's eternal plan." Jesus' purpose was to effect salvation on earth, not in heaven. But the cross is central in the sense that God is at the mercy of his creatures. He repudiates justice and power to bring redemption through self-offering. The resurrection then does not turn the suffering Christ into a literal conqueror but is the stamp of approval on Jesus' career on earth.³⁴ "But the cross is only what happens when the ministry is rejected. It is God's activity, not his passivity, which is the dominant theme of the Gospel records of Jesus."³⁵

In his Rall Lectures at Garrett Theological Seminary in the spring of 1969, Vincent spoke of Christians today being called to "act parables" by shifting into other men's situations so that they, in turn, could act differently. The prophets, he said, acted parables of rejection: Christ acted parables of acceptance. "Christianity is all that understanding of existence which is hidden in Christ, and the appearance of *this* is what the world is waiting for, from the church and from us, today."³⁶

c) *Jesus Christ and the Pain of God*. A third approach, from a quite different quarter of the church, is given by the Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori in his *Theology of the Pain of God*. Moved by portrayals in Jeremiah and Isaiah of the inner anguish of God confronted by Israel's sin, together with the New Testament presentation of Jesus Christ and the last decades of war, Kitamori sums up the message of the Bible in the theme of "love rooted in the pain of God." God's love of the world, beginning in immediacy in relation to its created goodness, becomes wrath at the world's rejection of him. The love of God for the world in spite of rejection arises out of his pain. "The complete victory of God is only in his pain."³⁷ That is, love in spite of

³³ John J. Vincent, "Christocentric Radicalism," *Christian Century*, May 8, 1968, p. 614.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 615.

³⁵ *Secular Christ*, p. 216.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

³⁷ Kazoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1965), p. 162.

rejection cannot be rejected. Thus he speaks of the pain of God as the mediator between God and man.³⁸

This pain is not a mythical entity, however. Jesus Christ is himself mediator as he is God's pain. "The gospel is fact because it happened outside our thoughts, emotions, and experiences—that is, outside of ourselves. The gospel is an event that happened once for all, and it cannot be repeated. It is a fact represented by the name 'Jesus Christ.'³⁹ That fact is the forgiveness of sin. The only forgivable sin, Kitamori says, is imaginary sin. Forgiveness for a forgivable sin is a denial of the pain of God.⁴⁰ But in pain, God forgives *unforgivable* sin. This is what happened in Jesus Christ. In Luther's words, "God fought with God." Liberalism's commitment to God's forgiving nature is the denial of the pain of God. As mediator Jesus could only *act* the pain of God: he could not explain it.⁴¹

Christians are called to enter the service of the pain of God in their own pain.⁴² Only in God's pain is human pain healed and transformed from barrenness which is sin. What is this "service of God's pain"? "Believers, though they have already been freed from the wrath of God, must share the pain of unbelievers, and thus help them to accept their pain as a symbol of God's pain in order to be united with God. Intercession is an act to unite with God those who are unable to be united by themselves."⁴³ "Man (regardless of his goodness or his faith) is united with God by his pain; man (regardless of his evilness or unbelief) is severely estranged from God by his lack of pain."⁴⁴ If everyone else forgets pain, we Christians cannot: "Pain must be our function."⁴⁵

The church is symbol of the pain of God. But this pain is not imaginary or purely sympathetic. It is not curiosity under another name—as Kierkegaard labeled so much of our sympathy.⁴⁶ It arises from entering into the sufferings of mankind. The pain of God is the most severe experience we can know.⁴⁷ The ethic of the pain of God is particularly appropriate to our age which knows so much pain, but it is only in the pain of God—love in spite of rejection—that the ethic of pain can be realized. The neighbor is accepted because he is neighbor, not because he is

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.

lovable. And neighbor means any one at hand, believer or unbeliever. Though consistent love of the unlovable has transforming power, this is not its justification. "The agony of the world is a symbol of God's pain, and God's pain means the ultimate good tidings of the salvation of the world; these tidings are the truth of all truth."⁴⁸

Security and the God-Category

At least on the intentional level, in each of these three cases there is a refusal to identify success and safety with the thrust of the gospel. Jesus the mediator means identification rather with the poor and the suffering. One may immediately object, "But the church has never identified success and safety with the gospel." In the form of "correct teaching" perhaps not. But in its daily life and in the theology which belongs with it, the church does. In most congregations, to violate the mores of middle class conventionality with the mores of lower class conventionality is regarded far more seriously than theological heresy. The tension with both black and Indian cultures in America is frequently with their style of life which rejects "getting ahead" in the middle class and frequently assumed "Christian" sense of the phrase. From personal experience in preparing church school curricular materials, I know that any graphic presentation of Christ other than as a handsome young man peering intently into the future brings a spate of critical letters to the editors and the author. Furthermore, the vast silent majority which neither pickets nor revolts is assumed to be the good, substantial, Christian population.

Local churches are baffled by tension and conflict which they regard as completely disruptive of their purpose, so that by both subtle and overt processes of member selection those who challenge that image of inner accord are rejected. This is a major reason why the younger generation, oriented more to confrontation, are baffled by the local church. Short of staging a major disruption it is harder there to conduct a genuine discussion where differing points of view are taken seriously and not merely rhetorically, than to attack a pillow with boxing gloves or blow up a pile of sandbags with dynamite. By teaching that following Christ is not only ultimately safe but proximately good policy,

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

the church rejects risk offhand and tries to meet the world imperialistically. The church I know approaches its work with the poor from a base of assumed economic privilege and in its major denominational forms finds it virtually impossible to become indigenously poor. Most local congregations are not poor: if they are sensitive, they are concerned to be of service *to* the poor.

In recent decades, the churches and their theologians have talked a good deal about conflict and alienation. But it has been an alienation within each person, so that he could fight out the battle without disturbing the institutional or systematic waters. Or if the alienation was more widely interpreted, one entered it through empathy or sympathy. But for increasing numbers of us, the critical alienation is something we meet every day in a short circuit of our sympathy. I and my colleagues have to deal with a manifesto by a group which threatens to bring theological education in our school to a halt if its demands are not met. I watch the night news on television and see an interview with a student graduated a few years ago whose church has been occupied by a neighborhood gang until it accedes to their demands.⁴⁹ I am called to sign a petition in behalf of a local school issue, the alternative to its proposition being the possible literal burning down of the community's schools. A close graduate student has just been hounded out of his church by a self-appointed committee from another parish that has taken on itself to rid the church of socially involved clergy. The context of our discussion is no longer the stimulating argument of old friends at a cozy fireside, but the church in agony in its relation to the world (its loss of prestige, the growing attacks on its wealth, irrelevance, and institutional forms) and to itself (caucuses black, white, and renewal which have learned how to break men, Concerned Methodists, radical budget slashes, and the like). Here is where the understanding of mediation must do its work of reconciliation.

By suggesting that blackness or pain or self-sacrifice are normative of Christian discipleship, the three theologians mentioned give up the successful Christ and presumably the church forms which go with him. But to the extent that they fulfill their intention, they also give up theology as a contained system. For although faith in Jesus Christ entails the kind of commitment in

⁴⁹ Since this paper was delivered, he and his wife have been murdered in their parsonage.

which the believer must declare to himself, if to no one else, "For me this is the way things must be, though I do not actually see them so now," the attempt to make a system of this, to work out a whole theology or cosmic structure inevitably results in an affirmation of the present state of affairs in general or the uncritical justification of some one group in particular. The materials for that kind of a theology must be drawn from sources other than Jesus Christ.

The tendency toward such justification is as biblical as the recurrent attempts to claim the identity of "faithful remnant" or "God's poor" on an explicit social basis. It is found in the New Testament in the assumption that the true church is necessarily at peace with itself so that all disruption comes from outside: false teachers (II Peter 2:1), those with us but not of us, (I John 2:19), followers of ungodly passions, (Jude 18-19), and the like. If the son is set against his father and the daughter against her mother and a man's enemies are those of his own household (Luke 12:53), the conclusion too frequently drawn is that son and daughter ought at least to see eye to eye with each other and that away from household ties one might enjoy intense camaraderie. This is the commitment which has given us a church that will deny reality rather than feel pain.

In another form this becomes the theology of party revolution. While Dr. Cone does recognize the new orientation that comes with the mediation of a black Christ ("Radical obedience to Christ means that reward cannot be the motive for action"⁵⁰), he has an implicit confusion between *black* meaning the down-trodden and oppressed, the equivalent of the New Testament "poor," and *black* meaning not only those of a particular skin color but those of that color who take a particular stance toward society. "Black theology," he writes, "knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself."⁵¹ In this light, God is categorically not to be found in the suburb, only in the ghetto.⁵² With Kitamori, the pain of God threatens to become a new *logos*, implicit in Japanese, as against Greek, tragedy.⁵³

⁵⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 125.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵³ Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God*, pp. 133 ff.

The danger of preparing an apology for a specific group is less evident in Vincent's writings, perhaps because he works in a less socially polarized setting and perhaps because he is more oriented toward the church itself. But the poor man of Jesus' concern is not always the economically underprivileged and even as a "black" Christ (in Cone's first sense of the word), he is found with the rich.

A reading of the Gospels shows that, unlike Milton and many others, Jesus does not set out to justify the ways of God to man or to create the kind of homogeneous community which is the sword edge of political or social revolution. This is by no means insignificant for us, because it means that he does not mediate the usual sort of historicist god at all. There is no access to what he is talking about other than his way. And in this sense to follow him is to become an atheist—not because we have created a satisfying theological system which does not need the "God hypothesis" or because as modern men we have found God-talk meaningless. But a God developed from this world through nature, reason, or history is a god who justifies the world without redeeming it. Vincent's argument against the various providential schemes is that they cannot come to terms with the *skandalon* of the gospel. If the living God is the unique title for the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, then the living God is not a category in this kind of theology.

This living God may permit the crucifixion of his servants instead of the political or economic freedom of his people. This living God does not give us the key to make sense of everything. He rather shatters whatever sense it once made for us. The living God is a problem, not an answer. He is the piece left over after the puzzle has been completely assembled. The orientation of Jesus is profoundly eschatological in the sense that what he justifies has yet to come about. But that sort of open-endedness does not make good theology. For theology one must have hints or full plans of how it shall all turn out in order to make it safe again. In a parody of Kierkegaard's pictures of Abraham sacrificing Isaac at the beginning of *Fear and Trembling*, Abbie Hoffman has a middle-class Abraham saying, "I did it for the kids."⁵⁴ Kierkegaard's Abraham struggled against a theology,

⁵⁴ *Free, Revolution for the Hell of It* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), p. 12.

which is why much of the church has great difficulty in understanding him.

Much in the New Testament indicates that suffering and living without answers are the expected lot of Christians and the church; that if the church is alive, it will be in agony—within itself and not only in relation to the world. There is the hero Christology of Hebrews which calls Christians to be with Christ outside the camp of established safety and does not imply that out there they will establish a new camp around the base of the cross with defenses and sentries. There is the First Epistle of Peter which distinguishes between deserved reproach and suffering as a Christian, a distinction we should be careful to mark today. (Of course, we cannot assume that suffering approved by our churches is thereby participation in the sufferings of Christ.)

There is a frightening parting of the ways of the zealot Christ and his historicist God, of the sentimental Christ and his oil-on-troubled-waters God, of the vulnerable Christ and his living God. But of the latter, a theology, full and complete, can scarcely come. Too much is open-ended. Too much hangs on the simple command, "Take up your cross and follow me." Too much weighs on the silence before authorities rather than an answer for everyone who asks.

One day when I was taking a class through Chicago's Art Institute to study there the graphic presentation of historical change, we came across a lecturer expounding the huge El Greco "Assumption of the Virgin" to a group of children. He talked about El Greco's use of color, about his composition which pulled everything together and forced the eye to the focal center of the canvas to expand religious imagination. Then he turned to compare this painting's excellence with opposite qualities he found in a nearby painting of the resurrection. Here, he said, the color was not unifying but distracting—bright splotches against an almost black background. The composition was fragmenting—one's eye started at the center only to be driven back and forth, up and down, across the canvas with no resting place. How inferior, the guide said, compared with El Greco. And then as an afterthought he added, "Of course, this artist is interpreting the resurrection. Maybe he was trying to tell us that it was like an explosion, breaking our whole world apart." With no further word, the group moved on to the next gallery.

Perhaps the resurrection is not that which pulls everything together, fitting the cross into an overall scheme, the stamp of approval of the safe God on the disturbing, dividing ministry of Jesus. It may rather be the manifesto against the god-category of theology.