

THE BLACK CULTURAL REVOLUTION

By Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr.

I would like to use the Memorial Day observance as a jumping-off place this morning, not to spend our time talking about Memorial Day but to use it to help understand our position here in America. We had for our Scripture lesson this morning the 68th Psalm. In this Psalm the psalmist is dealing with the power of God and describing Israel's faith that God is concerned about Israel, that he is the God of the nation, Israel. The psalmist says in many ways that God has power and that God uses his power for the benefit and in the interests of Israel. So I have taken my text this morning from the 68th Psalm, 35th verse, "The God of Israel is he that gives strength and power unto his people." I think this is important for us, this concept of God as he who gives strength and power unto his people, because in the world in which we live, in this strange situation in which we find ourselves as black people, we sometimes forget that God is related to a people, to their aspirations, to their struggle. We sometimes forget that historically, down through the ages, all people have believed that God gives power and strength to his people. In actual practice, the world over, religion and the church and, by implication, God exist to serve the interests of a particular nation. We don't usually think of it this way. We think of God as being universal, God as a power and a force that extends anywhere in the world. And yet, as we look specifically at any people, at any time, in any place in the history of the world, we see that every people has believed itself to be in a special relationship with God. And in this sense religion and the church, and by implication God, exist really to serve the nation. People worship God, they serve God, they sacrifice in the name of God because they believe that God serves them, as a people, as a nation. No people will long serve a God who does not give them strength and power as a people. Nowhere in the history of the world has a people served a God who did not in their eyes, in their mind, give them strength and power. People expect God to give them strength and power as a people.

This is a strange concept only for us because we are in a peculiar kind of situation, a situation that exists perhaps for the first time in the history of the world. We are a nation within a nation. We are a black nation existing as a minority within the geographical confines of a white nation. And over a period of time we have tended to confuse our separate identity with the identity of the majority. We tend to think that there is but one nation and that we do not exist as a nation. So then, our relationship with God has taken on a very peculiar character. We do not understand the relationship which people normally have with God. Because in this situation which we exist in we have come to think of ourselves not as a black nation but in some strange way as part of the white nation. So I must ask you to think as we talk this morning of the very simple fact that for all people, in all countries everywhere, throughout the ages, religion and the church and by implication God also exist to serve the interests of a nation.

In olden days people defeated in battle would give up their gods and take on the gods of their conquerors. The people who had vanquished them would in their eyes have more powerful gods, so, if they were defeated in battle, they would take on the gods of those who had defeated them on the very simple, straightforward ground that if those people could beat us in battle their gods must be more powerful than ours. This was a simple approach to man's religion. But these people did not have racial differences to separate them and they could therefore take on the gods of those who had conquered them in battle and soon there would be no distinction between those who had conquered and those who had been conquered. So they could say "This God is our God. We can accept him as ours because he is powerful and he has overcome our God." The psalmist says it quite simply, "The God of Israel is

he that gives strength and power unto his people." God took care of the nation, Israel, in war and in peace. The fortunes of Israel were tied up inextricably with the will of God. Whatever happened to the nation of Israel, the people of Israel knew that it was God's will; God was protecting, punishing, rewarding them. When Joseph led the nation Israel in its early days into Egypt, it was because God had made possible Joseph's being taken into Egypt and for him to rise to the position of power and prominence in Egypt so that when famine came to the world, the nation Israel could be taken into Egypt where they could find food and shelter and friendship. This was an act of God taking care of his nation. And when finally the came to Egypt a pharaoh who knew not Joseph and the people of Israel were reduced to slavery, then God intervened again through Moses and Israel was delivered from bondage and slavery. Again God had entered in to take care of his people, the nation Israel. God led Israel to the Promised Land, the particular geographical area which God designated for his nation, and God helped Israel conquer the Promised Land. For the Promised Land was not just land without inhabitants. People lived there, there were cities; but God chose to take this land and give it to Israel. At least this is what Israel believed. In battle God protected Israel. You remember the stories of the battles in the Old Testament when the prophet must stand upon the hillside with his hands outstretched to God as a symbol of the nation's dependence upon God so that they might win in battle. Remember the prophet standing on the hillside as the battle took place, holding up his hands and stopping the sun, stopping time until Israel had defeated her enemies. This is the conception of man's relationship with God in the Bible. and all this is reasonable and understandable. It is only natural that God should take care of his own people, his nation. It is only natural that a people should depend upon their God to give them the strength and power to overcome their enemies. This is basic to all religion - the faith that God will provide the strength and power to overcome enemies.

All this we can see clearly in the church's observance of Memorial Day. Throughout the country, today, churches, especially Christian Churches are observing Memorial Day in one way or another. America will call upon its God to give it strength and power through its churches. The churches' participation in this kind of Memorial Day service is the churches' recognition of the fact that God has a particular concern for white Americans. They are asking the God that they believe has a special interest in white Americans to demonstrate that interest. The church mourns the nation's dead and the church is giving religious sanctity to the cause for which this dead died. In churches there will be sermons preached which will try to relive the cause for which these men died in battle in the wars which have passed.

I have here a little book on Protestant Services and Festivals. In the section on Memorial Day it says, "This is of particular significance in the civil calendar." Patriotic groups will gather in a body in a particular parish and stirring national hymns and anthems will be sung. Ceremonies are peached in one of several cases. Sometimes they honor all the blessed dead who paid the last full measure of devotion in the service of their country. The sermon will often close with an exhortation to be true to the men who have made this sacrifice in one of the world wars of our own day." And it quotes the famous poem: "Take up our quarrel with the foe; / To you from failing hands we throw / The torch; yours to hold it high." And it mentions the great white preacher, Dr. Ernest Fremont Tittle, and his sermon, "The Unfinished Task" which has been copied in many Christian churches. He says, "It is no new idea that the valiant dead must look to us for the realization of ends for which they laid the world away." This is exactly the sort of thing we find in the Old Testament and this is the 20th century. This is the white church looking to their white God for guidance and deliverance, for strength and power, in their struggles and thair wars, for their causes and against their enemies. It says that Dr. Tittle says in this great sermon, "Whatever others may do or fail to do, we must

do what we can to establish a just and lasting peace. We must keep faith with the dead." With their dead. The religious significance of these problems is lifted up for consideration and the resources of religion are brought to their solution.

I mention this so that you will see that this is not a peculiar thing, this Old Testament conception of God being concerned with the nation. All people believes that God is especially concerned about them. If they didn't believe it, they would not worship God. People do not worship a God to keep them in slavery and bondage. People worship a God who helps them find freedom because every people believe that God intended that they be free, that God created them in his own image, that God wants them to live as men. So every people believe that God is concerned about them, about their destiny, about their cause. So America calls upon its God to give it strength and power. Its God, of course, just happens to be a God that they stole from somebody, but in their minds it doesn't matter because most of them are too ignorant to know that. So they call upon their God to give them strength and power, and the church, then, throughout America mourns the nation's dead and gives religious sanctity to the cause for which they died. The church also in this manner pronounces the wars in which they died to be or to have been just wars. On Memorial Day when they stand up in the pulpit and ask people to remember with reverence those who died in World War I, in World War II, the church is giving the sanctity of God to the wars in which this nation has engaged. And there is one peculiar thing about our observance in a black church. The nation that they talk about is not our nation, the causes for which they died are not our causes. The sacrifices of our young men were sacrifices which cannot but be considered waste because they were not for our cause. So Memorial Day becomes for us a paradoxical kind of observance. Now you can barbecue all the ribs you want, but remember that Memorial Day is a paradoxical situation for us because the things they celebrate, the dead they mourn are something separate and apart from us. This is one of the difficulties of being a black man in a white man's land. Now I know you don't go all the way with me on this, but that is one of the difficulties. Most of the time we slide right over that, and there are plenty of black preachers today talking about our dead, our wars, our nation, and they won't stop to think for one moment that that has got nothing to do with us. In most of the wars even those of our men who went were discriminated against, were segregated. This is the first war in which we have not been segregated.

In this war we are discriminated against because they are taking all of us and making us fight the war. They are getting smart. In other wars they said "we don't want you at all. If you are in the war, you are in there for one purpose only, to serve us." So you were a messboy on a battleship or in the Army you were in a labor battalion. They didn't want black soldiers. They fought against it. In this war, in today's world, they realize they can't do that any more. In the first place, something has happened to us. Too many of us don't think right any more. Too many of us have got strange ideas and the best thing to do with a black man with strange ideas is to send him someplace and kill him. The easiest way to do that is just to draft him and send him to Vietnam. Not only does he get killed but in getting killed over there he turns the whole world against all of us, and black men over there look at him and say, "Why are you over here killing us? We are your brothers." In this confusion the white man has learned how to make us destroy ourselves.

We have got to use Memorial Day as a key to understanding what the white man does to us as black men living in a white man's land. If we could understand Memorial Day, we could understand a whole lot of things that happen in this country. If we could just get out of the habit of going through the motions. I understand what some of you are thinking right now. "I am not a black man in a white man's country," That is what you are saying. "He shouldn't be saying that. I am an

American in America." You have that feeling, don't you? Because when you were little children in kindergarten they had you pledging allegiance to the flag and singing the national anthem. They showed you pictures of all the great heroes, the father of our country, George Washington; the man who freed you, Abraham Lincoln. Those images are back there, you can't just cut them out. You can fight against them, you can rise above them, but they are there, and when I say "You are a black man living in a white man's land," you kind of resent it. Then you will give me the argument, "We have shed our blood for this country, we built the railroads, we built the skyscrapers." Langston Hughes wrote all those poems before he died about what we have done. Dubois wrote some of them too in his early days. "This is our country because we built it." We built it but it is not our country. We built it the way slaves build, as slave labor, as exploited slave labor, and you don't love something that someone makes you build. You don't love it because you are here. You love it because it belongs to you, because you have a share in it.

Maybe you are not, but I am a black man in a white man's land. I know it and I hate it. I know what it means, for children and young people. I know they are being brainwashed day after day, and unless we can unbrainwash them I know what is happening to them. They are black people, black children in a white man's world and they don't know what it means and so they get confused. They get all mixed up, they don't know whether they are coming or going. They are in a second-class school, being mistaught, being misled about everything. They are sitting up in that second-class school where the teachers are for the most part condescending, where those in charge are white, they are being taught that this is your America. That is a horrible thing to do to a child.

So we are black men in a white man's land. It is his land because he controls it. We underestimate - and this is one of our difficulties - what it means to live and become a man in a white man's world. We underestimate his power, what he does to us, the subtlety of the way in which he undermines our confidence, the way he steals our history, the way he makes us ashamed of what we are. We underestimate all this. We just go along from day to day. Now you may be one of the lucky ones. Nothing too bad happens to you. You are sorry you have bad hair; when you look in the mirror in the morning you wish you were not so ugly and that you looked pretty like the other people. But you don't worry too much about those things. You don't think them too important, that's why. But they are important, so important, because what you think of yourself is going to determine what you are. If you think you are nothing, that is just what you are going to be. We underestimate this whole thing, the difficulties of living in a white man's world. Memorial Day brings some of these difficulties to mind, but it is much more complicated than just a holiday, like July 4th when we celebrate our freedom. Everything here is distorted to serve his interests. Everything. You go to the library, the big one downtown, not the black libraries in your neighborhood where they don't have too much, but the downtown library which is full of books, millions of them, and you have the feeling that all this is true here. This is objective science and objective literature right here. You stand here and you feel humble in the midst of all this great knowledge that the white man has accumulated. You take out a book and you look at it with reverence, and you just hope you can share in this great culture that the white man has created. You go to the library and look at all those books and you think this is Truth. Well, those books are full of lies. They are not true in the sense that you think they are true. You think of Truth as objective, as existing anywhere in any generation. Truth is true, you think. Well, Truth is what serves the best interests of a people. That library is just full of white truth, because everything in it was written to serve his interests. When you get a book out, realize that what you are reading is what the white

man has written to serve his interests and it would serve his interest if I would believe it and accept it as being some kind of objective Truth. That is not Truth, not our Truth. We have got to understand that. There are all kinds of Truth in this world. You have been going around thinking there is one kind of truth that you have to memorize. That is a lie. Everybody has his own truth. I don't blame the white man for doing that. It is his Truth. Everything that happens he writes it down the way he wants it to put on the shelves. Read any magazine that is coming out currently and reporting history. Read about something that is happening in Detroit. You are amazed at how that man can lie right while it is happening. You don't even recognize the events that he is describing. Maybe it could be true, you think, when he writes about what is happening in New York when you are in Detroit, but find something that happened right here where you were and you think it must have been somewhere else. He doesn't try to write the truth. He writes what serves his interests. When you read the newspapers, don't think you are reading the truth. You are reading the truth that serves his interests, that's all. He has enough sense to do that and don't underestimate him. He is not bound by what we think is the truth when he sits down to write.

Now a whole lot of you are thinking, "He shouldn't say that." We can't document it. Document it! What difference does it make whether you can document it or not? Lies, myths, distortions - this is the whole white man's world. Everything in it is designed to suit his interests. We can see history in the making right over there in Vietnam. All this stuff that LBJ and the State Department put out - there is no truth in it. But that is the way history is going to be written about this period - if this country manages to squeeze its way out. America was over there at the invitation of a friendly government helping that friendly government fight against an invader from the North, helping a friendly country fight against the vicious communist aggressors. That is the way history will be taught - and it is all a pack of lies. We are over there because this country wants to establish a base in Asia to dominate Asia. That is why we are there. This country set it up that way. The Geneva Convention set up certain prerequisites for the unification of Vietnam. We destroyed that possibility. We set up a puppet government in Vietnam. We have maintained that puppet government against the wishes of the people. We are the aggressors in Asia. Yet the history books will tell it LBJ's way. And if they do that with Vietnam, what will they do with World War I, World War II, Spanish-American War, and all the other wars and things this country has engaged in? A vast tissue of lies.

Truth is what serves the best interests of a people. We have got to understand that. That is what Vincent Harding said when he was here at the Conference on Racism. "The future is controlled by the past, and those who control the present control the past." They write the books, they control the records, they tell it like they want it to be. That is one of the difficulties of living in a white man's world, because there is no truth anywhere. When you go to school, there is no truth there, not for you. That is the white man's truth. That is why his teachers are so zealous about passing on his vast tissue of lies. It is necessary to his interests to pass on that tissue of lies. That is why, if you are going to teach black children, you must go to the white man's school to learn how to do it. And that is why black teachers don't know what to teach, even if they come to realize that what they are teaching is a lie. They don't know what else to teach.

That is one of the difficulties of living as a black man in a white man's world. Everything is distorted to serve his interests. We are forced to see things through his eyes. You may not know it but everything you see is through the white man's eyes. You think you are looking through your own eyes but he got them fixed, you are looking through his eyes, and you are seeing it all the way he wants you to see it. We can understand him. But when we start seeing things through his

eyes we are sick. It is a sickness that you don't notice maybe, but you are sick. When we see things through his eyes, the way he wants us to see them, when we accept his whole tissue of lies as being truth and not realizing that it is not truth, then we are sick. History is his history. When you go to the library, remember that. The history there is written the way he wanted it written. It is natural that he should say that things didn't exist until he discovered them, that there was no America until the white man discovered America. What happened before he got here didn't matter to the white man. Africa didn't exist until the white man got there because as far as he was concerned there was nothing happening there until he got there. That is natural - for him. But it is not natural for us and yet we are in that predicament. We too believe that nothing happened until the white man got there.

Remember history is his history, art is his art. When you go to the Art Museum and you see black parents taking little black children around by the hand so that they will be cultured, remember that is his art. Everything is to his interest, his beauty, his history, his religion. Everything in there is his. But we walk through there and try to make ourselves knowledgeable. You go into black homes you see art books on the table to show that they are up on the stuff. That is his art. There is a book of introduction to art in which they pass off the so-called Primitive Art in four pages and then go on to a long elaborate section on Art in the Middle Ages, sad as it is. That is his art. You go down and look at it and most of it is sad. Most of that stuff in the Art Museum you could burn up, but they put a value on it. They think it is worth millions, yet most of it is nothing and certainly it is nothing to us. Music is their music. Some of you went to a black university and they taught you about his music, Bach and the others. It is his music. I don't care how objective you think you are. You say you just appreciate it. "I love to sit down of an evening with a cocktail and play classical records." You are just sick, because that is not your music. Even if you can objectively enjoy it, you ought to stop it. We can't afford it. You say, "our music - well we got the spirituals, jazz, gospel music" and you say you don't like jazz or gospel music. You prefer the Gregorian Chants. You are a liar. The man told you that. If you don't like spirituals, gospel music, jazz, then of an evening you take your cocktail and listen until you get so that you do like it. It is important because it is ours and the other stuff is his and when you start thinking that what is his is important to you, then you are sick.

So we have got to understand that the history we see about us in books, the art we see in his museums, the music they teach us in school is his. I heard about this librarian who was going to get a beautiful picture of the library in this school where there is not a single white child. She picked a picture full of little white children to put on the wall of the library for little black children to look at. If I belived in Mau Mau, I would send them over to get her. She doesn't know, she doesn't have the slightest idea that we have got our own art, and even if at the beginning it is poor, we ought to do better, we will do better but we must start with what we have. That is ours. Start building on it. Let's develop our own artists who will make our own art. Let's develop our own music. Don't sit down and listen to his music because every time you do you get sicker and sicker because you think he's got it. It's the same with drama. That is his drama and he will decide which plays are good ones and which are bad ones. Go down by the Fisher Theatre and you will see our "better people" walking down there to see his plays and they just know they are good. A black group can set up on Dexter and put on play after play, and these people will never get over there. Concept East goes on year after year trying to build a black drama, yet black people try to get their money together to go down to the Fisher Theatre to see what they have good over there. That is not ours. It is not out of our experience, it has nothing to do with us. We have got to understand that. That is one

of the difficulties of a black man living in a white man's world. You begin to believe everything he does is wonderful and you minimize what you do, and you don't develop what you can do, and if you get a black man who is doing something, he is trying to do it so it sounds white. A black writer has got to write what a white publisher will publish. They don't want him to write black. I am talking about writing out of our experiences, our hopes. Our lives are different from theirs. A black writer ought to be able to write for us, out of our background. But if he is going to get published in this country by a white publisher, he is going to have to write white. He is going to have to make us sound like simple simpering idiots. He is going to make us so bad that we can't afford to read the book or so simple that we are ashamed to read it. Look at the magazines, Woman's Home Companion - you get them for the stories you say. Not a story in it about us. The Liberator has stories in it about us but not too many of you read that.

These are the problems of living as a black man in a white man's world. It is natural for him to think that his history, his art, his music, his literature is great because it is his. But why should we think it is great? That is where you have to start thinking about your own minds. Why should you think it is great? Why should you try to pass it on to your little children? When he makes us think it is great, he has destroyed any possibility for our development, for our maturity, for our manhood. He has emasculated us because we are living in a pallid imitation of him. We can't do this. It is sickness unto death. We can't believe his lies.

Listen to this. We can't believe his lies. If we must, let's believe our own lies. There is no such thing as objective truth. We are going to tell it the way it is for us and that is what we are going to believe. We are not going to believe his lies. If we are going to believe some lies, we are going to believe our own lies. We are going to put it down the way we want it, and that is the way it is for us. Only then do we begin to be a people, a nation - only when we begin to put it together the way we want it and when we discard what he has put together. We have got to do it. We can't borrow his stuff and pretend it is ours. We have got to have different books for our children. Our children have got to look at his history books and know those books are his, the books of a foreign people. They have got to know that when they read the books. When they come from school, you have got to tell them, "Most of the things you learned today are about that other people. Now I am going to tell you about our own people." We have got to have different books for our children. We have got to get to the point in our neighborhoods where we can insist that this kind of white history be given as a special class, the way they now do us a big favor by giving us an Afro-American or Negro History class. In our schools we have got to say, "we don't like what you are teaching. Let's have a special class and any black children who want to study about your people can take this class. But it can't be enforced any more because we don't want our children to take it." Our children ought to take these courses just like in Russia they take courses about America. They want their children to understand America so that when they conquer America they will know how to act. We want to understand their books only to understand how the white man works, how he has distorted history, realizing all the time that it is not ours. We have got to get to the place eventually where we make the schools teach our history, our music, our art, all the things that belong to us, so that little black children don't come out of school with a sense of being inferior, of having been destroyed by what they have been taught. That is the problem of living as a black man in a white man's world.

One other thing in closing. We have got to understand that the white man doesn't tell the truth. That may be hard for you to accept because you know white people and you love them. The white man doesn't tell the truth. The ideas and

the principles he talks about do not include black people. That is hard for us to believe because we are used to talking about democracy and justice and brotherhood and love, and he talks about these too. We think he is talking about everybody and that mixes us up. He talks about democracy but when the white man talks about democracy he is not talking about us, he is talking about himself, he is talking about his relationship with other whites. When a white man talks about democracy, do you think he is talking about you? It may not be easy for you to accept but he is talking about himself. He doesn't believe that you are covered by principles of democracy that he accepts and believes in. He doesn't believe that the Constitution applies to you. If he did, do you think we have to have these civil rights acts every year? Why wouldn't we just be covered by the Constitution like anybody else? But every year he has got to have another act to show that we come under this or that provision of the Constitution. We come under all the provisions of the Constitution - but not to him. Now we have to argue whether we have open occupancy. Why is that a problem? Why do they have to vote on it? Because to the white man we are not a part of the democracy. Why do we have to fight to get into his church? Because he does not believe that his religion applies to us. During slavery good white Christians kept slaves and they didn't see any contradiction - because the Christianity they practiced didn't have anything to do with us. It only had to do with them.

This is the kind of world in which we live. We have got to understand it. We have got to understand that this confusion controls our thinking. We are always expecting the white man to act as though we were white. You go up and ask a white man something. You think he is looking at you as though you were white. But he is not. You are constantly puzzled, you are indignant, you are frustrated because he gives you one type of response and gives another type of response to a white person. He does it because he never did expect to treat you like another white man, and he is never going to change unless you make him change. He is not going to wake up one morning and say, "I have decided. White and black are all the same." He is never going to treat you as he treats himself. The problem with us is how are we going to treat ourselves. Are we going to become a nation, a black nation? Are we going to come together with a sense of confidence in ourselves, willing to build our own history, our own art, our own music, all the things we need? Are we going to reject his civilization because it is his, because it despises us just as he despises us? Are we going to develop a pride in ourselves? Are we going to believe that God is concerned about us, that God is giving us strength and power for the things we have to do? Are we going to make our churches centers for black people, centers in which black people derive the strength and power and unity necessary for survival in this white man's world? We have got to do it. It is the only justification for a black Christian church. We have gone back and seen that this is the way Christianity began. It began as a black man's religion. We are going to recapture that black man's religion, and today in the 20th century we are going to make our churches centers for the nation, out of which children and young people will go dedicated not to the white man's world but to the survival, the enhancement, the development, the expansion, the victory of the black nation. They can't learn it anywhere but in our churches. So we have got to make our churches centers for this kind of development, the development of a black nation. We have got to point it out time and time again because we don't get it all at one shot. It is hard to learn. Right now you will go out and you will be surprised when a white man treats you like a dog - this coming week. You will still be surprised. I am telling you now, don't be surprised. They are like that, they will treat you any way they think they can get away with. The only thing for us is unity as a nation, the development of the strength and power necessary to overcome an enemy. In this we depend upon our God, a black God, a black Jesus and a black nation. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank thee for this opportunity of coming into your house. We thank thee for this growing knowledge of what it means to be black in a white man's world, for the growing conviction that thou art our God, that we can depend upon thee for strength and for power in our struggle against our enemy. We depend upon thee and we ask that thou be with us to help us build our church, that this church may become a center for the nation, the black nation, and that out of it may come a people proud of themselves, proud of their history, their art, their music, their drama, proud of everything that belongs to them and willing to reject those things that make them feel ashamed and despise themselves. Help our children to come out of this church with a sense of the tremendous opportunities that are theirs as this nation unfolds in its understanding of itself, its problems and its opportunities. Give them a sense of dedication and be with us now and bring us together that we may overcome those trivial things that separate us and keep us apart. Help bring us together and make us a nation. This we ask in his name.

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