



God Is a Negro Henry McNeal Turner (1898)

Henry McNeal Turner was a freeborn African American, originally from South Carolina, who became a minister, later a bishop, in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Shortly after the Civil War, Turner was part of a cohort of over 30 African Americans who were elected to the Georgia state legislature but then expelled by a vote of the white legislators. His anger at the restrictions imposed on African Americans in the decades following Reconstruction made him an advocate of colonization—that is, of African Americans emigrating to Africa. Turner himself visited Africa multiple times but never emigrated.

*In 1895, Turner was invited to speak at the founding of the National Baptist Convention, USA, an organization of black Baptists. During his remarks, Turner made the intentionally provocative statement that “God is a Negro.” Three years later, he reiterated and explained that statement in the following editorial, published in a monthly religious newspaper he had founded. The editorial begins with a quotation from another periodical, the *Observer*, apparently edited by whites, which is reacting incredulously to Turner’s statement at the National Baptist Convention.*

Bishop Turner of the African Methodist Church says that “God is a Negro.” The good bishop has been represented as one of the ablest men of his race, and we thought justly so, for he is not only an intelligent thinker, but upon all subjects connected with his people his reasoning is profound and, in most instances, unanswerable; but he is evidently becoming demented if he used the language attributed to him.

Observer

The *Observer* has our thanks for the compliment tendered in respect to our thinking faculties, notwithstanding our demented condition when we understand God to be a Negro.

We have as much right, biblically and otherwise, to believe that God is a Negro as you *buckra*, or white people, have to believe that God is a fine-looking, symmetrical, and ornamented white man. For the bulk of you, and all the fool Negroes of the country, believe that God is a white-skinned, blue-eyed, straight-haired, projecting-nosed, compressed-lipped, and finely robed WHITE gentleman sitting upon a throne somewhere in the heavens.

Every race of people, since time began, who have attempted to describe their God by words, or by paintings, or by carvings, or by any other form or figure, have conveyed the idea that the God who made them and shaped their destinies was symbolized in themselves, and why should not the Negro believe that he resembles God as much so as other people? We do not believe that there is any hope for a race of people who do not believe they look like God.

Demented though we be, whenever we reach the conclusion that God, or even that Jesus Christ, while in the flesh, was a white man, we shall hang our gospel trumpet upon the willow and cease to preach.

We had rather be an atheist and believe in no God, or a pantheist and believe that all nature is God, than to believe in the personality of a God and not to believe that He is a Negro. Blackness

is much older than whiteness, for black was here before white [...] We do not believe in the eternity of matter, but we do believe that chaos floated in infinite darkness, or blackness, millions, billions, quintillions, and eons of years before God said, "Let there be light," and that during that time God had no material light Himself and was shrouded in darkness, so far as *human* comprehension is able to grasp the situation.

Yet we are no stickler as to God's color, anyway; but if He has any, we would prefer to believe that it is nearer symbolized in the blue sky above us and the blue water of the seas and oceans. But we certainly protest against God being a white man, or against God being white *at all*, abstract as this theme must forever remain while we are in the flesh.

This is one of the reasons we favor African emigration, or Negro nationalization wherever we can find a domain. For as long as we remain among the whites, the Negro will believe that the devil is black and that he (the Negro) favors the devil, and that God is white and that he (the Negro) bears no resemblance to Him, and the effect of such a sentiment is contemptuous and degrading; and one half of the Negro race will be trying to get white, and the other half will spend their days in trying to be white men's scullions in order to please the whites, and the time they should be giving to the study of such things as will dignify and make our race great will be devoted to studying about how unfortunate they are in not being white.

We conclude these remarks by repeating for the information of the *Observer* what it adjudged us demented for—"God is a Negro."

Source: [Henry McNeal Turner,] “God Is a Negro,” *Voice of Missions* 6, no. 2 (February 1898): 2. Digital scan available via the Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/bim_early-english-books-1641-1700_voice-of-missions_1898-02-01_6_2. Public domain in the United States because published in the United States before 1923.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Additional paragraph breaks inserted for readability. Formatting of the epigraph emended. Two run-on sentences broken up. A typographical error (a missing letter) corrected. A missing indefinite article inserted. *Any way* emended to *anyway*. An opening quotation mark relocated. Other punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. The periodical title *Observer* consistently italicized. The word *buckra* converted to italics to mark it as foreign. The varying use of small caps and italics for emphasis replicates the source.

The capitalization of *Negro* reproduces the usage of the source publication. So does the capitalization of divine pronouns and the consistent capitalization of *God* (e.g., *their God*, not *their god*). An instance of *bishop*, capitalized in the source, has been converted here to lowercase because it is not a title preceding a name.

These edited excerpts from Turner’s editorial are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

See also: Multiple periodicals of the day had *Observer* in the title; it is unclear to which Turner refers. Searches of historical periodicals digitally accessible via Chronicling America, ProQuest, Readex: America’s Historical Newspapers, and the British Newspaper Archive have not located the source of Turner’s *Observer* quotation.

The full text of Turner’s 1895 address to the National Baptist Convention, USA, to which the *Observer* appears to be responding, has not been preserved. Turner briefly reported on his 1895 address in “God Is a Negro,” *Voice of Missions* 3, no. 11 (November 1895), 3, https://archive.org/details/bim_early-english-books-1641-1700_voice-of-missions_1895-11_3_11.

A scandalized response to Turner’s 1895 address, by a white Baptist minister who spoke at the same convention, is found in Henry Lyman Morehouse, “The Spirit and Policy of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, in Its Work for the Colored People of the South,” *Baptist Home Mission Monthly* 17, no. 11 (November 1895), 414, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015014851839>.

For an earlier iteration of Turner’s argument about the pernicious effects of African Americans envisioning God as white, see Henry McNeal Turner, “Essay: The American Negro and the Fatherland,” in *Africa and the American Negro*, ed. J.W.E. Bowen (Atlanta, GA: Gammon Theological Seminary, 1896), 197, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433075934467>.



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