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Source: *Pacific Journal 2* (2007): 29-49.

Publisher: Fresno Pacific University.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/370>

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The Two Faces of Racism—Undeserved Discrimination and Undeserved Privilege

ZENEBE ABEBE

Note: This article was originally envisioned as a collaborative effort with Mary Ann Larsen-Pusey. Soon after we began work, on the morning of July 14, 2005, Mary Ann was found slain in her home. She was passionate about racism and taught a class on the topic for many years. I will always remember her strong interest in the topic and her support. I wish to dedicate this article to her.

“So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Gen. 1:27 (NRSV)

Introduction

This article is about racism within the context of Christianity’s influence in the world. Given the breadth of the subject matter discussed, I will begin with several rhetorical questions. First, since Christianity’s emergence some two millennia ago, how have Christians, particularly those in positions of power, viewed persons not sharing the same external physical characteristics? What role did the construct of race play in Christianity’s approach to such persons over the centuries? Though there is no specific biblical reference to race as a way to classify humans, institutional Christianity has had a mixed record on the issue of race. The Scriptures only speak of *tribe, people, language, and nation*, not of race.

I propose to show how institutional Christianity has both supported and opposed racism. I also want to probe the confusing stance many Christians today continue to take in their approach toward people who have been defined in some way as being from a different racial group. Since racism continues to be a pervasive and chronic problem in this country,¹ the aim here is not only to look at what happened in the past, but also at the current climate of racism in the United States. The broad spectrum of opinion quoted in this article may be provocative, but it represents the range of experiences and expressions of racism today. Racism, both within and outside of the church, continues to be a painful reality for people of color. White Americans need to realize that the Civil Rights movement has not wiped out racism. Racism is alive and well and continues to disrupt the daily lives of people of color.

In this article I will define race and racism; trace the influence of Christianity, the responses of Christians as individual believers and of the church as an institution to this tragedy; delineate how race is used as a tool for both evil and good; and finally, I will examine the effects of racism in our world both on the victims and on the perpetrators.

In the Christian Scriptures one can find a rejection of identifying believers on the basis of race or any other category. From Genesis to Revelation, God's position on anti-racism has been documented. Perhaps drawing inspiration from the creation of mankind in God's image (Genesis 1:27) numerous Christian passages (Acts 17: 26, Galatians 3:28-29, Ephesians 2:11-18, and Revelation 7:9) show that God's plan was for people to live without dividing walls, that together they would bring glory to Him. While there have been instances of racism throughout the world, the focus of this article will be on the racist ideologies of Westerners through the centuries and racism in the United States in particular within the context of the modern Western constructions of race. The impact of this upon the Christian churches cannot be ignored.

What is racism?

The term race as a category primarily referring to skin color was first used by Francois Bernier, a French physician, in 1684. This was during a period of European expansionism throughout the world and helped European countries justify their domination of people in the burgeoning empires. Early categories included labels such as *Mongoloid*, *Negroid*, and *Caucasoid*.² The term *white* was first used in 1691. This terminology replaced earlier designations of people by nationality or ethnic group. By the 1700s, race began to supplant the prior division of humans as either *Christian* or *pagan*. It was during this same period that Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a German naturalist and anthropologist, divided the human species into five races: *Caucasian* or white race, *Mongolian* or yellow race, *Malayan* or brown race, *Negro* or black race, and *American* or red race. Color labels such as *red*, *brown*, and *yellow*, *black*, and *white* persist in the English language of the Western (Christian) world.

We see that these classifications persist in the twenty-first-century Christian churches. *The Myth of Race*³ classifies race as: Caucasoid (Caucasian or white from Mt. Caucasus), Negroid (black), Mongoloid (yellow from Mongolia) and *Australoid* (brown from Australia). As in this video and elsewhere, the shift from geographical to a hierarchical ordering of human diversity has to be the most dangerous transition in the history of Western science.

However, today, the term race/racism is not only designed to divide people by color from whites socially, but it is used to confuse and divide and to insure domination by whites. It is a tool to provide opportunities, power, and privileges for whites and to systematically marginalize and provide nothing but disadvantage to people of color.

For instance, in working with students, I find that most of them confuse the terms race, diversity, ethnicity, culture, and nationality, as well as prejudice and racism. I believe that they are not alone in this confusion. Census Bureau surveys use terms that include race (black, white, Negro, Caucasian), as well as ones that relate to ethnicity, culture, or national origin (Hispanic, Asian, Asian Pacific, Mexican, Mexican American, etc.). Therefore, it is important to have a clear understanding of the term race and how it differs from culture, ethnicity, or nationality.

According to Katz & Taylor, in the 1937 edition of Webster's unabridged dictionary, the word *racism* was not even included. By 1949, however, it clearly had entered into the lexicon, probably because of the racist philosophy of Nazi Germany. In the 1949 edition of *Webster's Intercollegiate Dictionary*, the term is defined as the "assumption of inherent racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races and consequent discrimination against other races."⁴

At the core of the race-related issues is the difference between individual prejudice and the institutional advantage of one group over others. Joseph Barndt has defined racism as "race prejudice plus power."⁵ I believe, as others do, that there cannot be racism without power. Here, I am talking about a misuse of institutional power that makes the impact of racism highly consequential. Caleb Rosado⁶ not only sees racism as the most important and persistent social problem in America and in the world today, but he makes a clear distinction between prejudice and racism: "Racism goes beyond prejudice (an attitude) to structure this power advantage politically, economically, culturally and religiously within a social system, whether it be simple (as in personal bias) or complex (as in the role apartheid played in South Africa), which gives social advantage to some at the expense of others perceived to be inferior and undeserving."

All humans have prejudices. We hold preferences that steer us toward that which is familiar rather than to that which is exotic or foreign. Most of us also tend to form our judgments about others without extensive knowledge. Given the dynamics of social patterns that are the legacy of institutionalized racism in the Western world, it is not surprising that most people do not know people from cultural or ethnic groups other than their own. In this

sense, prejudice is not the same as racism. Perhaps we can simply say that prejudicial attitudes could be limited to an individual behavior, but racism in the words of Barndt is, “a collective responsibility rather than personal guilt.”⁷ The collective responsibility becomes institutional responsibility—what we call today institutional racism.

Most social institutions suffer from the legacy of “institutionalized racism.” Constantine & Wang Sue⁸ and others have described institutional racism as racism that is embedded in our social structures, granting different treatment to groups of human beings based on skin color and physical features. There is ample evidence that in all social institutions (health care, economics, education, etc.) people of color receive inferior treatment than people who are considered “white” (Hacker, Obama, West).⁹ For example, in the United States, the study of disease concentrates on illnesses that afflict primarily “white people,” with less attention granted to diseases of people of color. In the field of education, it means that less-experienced teachers and fewer resources are provided to schools that are predominantly composed of students of color. Economically speaking, people of color pay higher interest rates when securing loans, pay higher prices for consumer goods, and are less likely to hold positions of power in industry, education, and business. Frequently, they are the last ones hired and the first ones fired.

Racism is about economics, although its roots and results are also deeply cultural. In addition, he states that racism has extensive psychological, sexual, religious, and political repercussions. As demonstrated by Adelman,¹⁰ there is no known scientific measurement to define race. We also know that the Bible does not recognize the term race. However, for the most part, the outcome of the research is no more than politically and socially motivated investigation, without any useful scientific information about race. Plous¹¹ noted that throughout the past century, research on prejudice has closely reflected the ideological leanings of society, telling us as much about the personal biases of the scientific community as about prejudice itself.

As documented by Barndt, Lang, Obama, and Constantine & Wing Sue,¹² persons of color (African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latinos) in the United States encounter daily mistreatment and discrimination simply because of color of their skin. When it comes to employment, education, and public services, this group receives less recognition and benefit compared to white people in this country. Whether they are at government institutions, private or church-related institutions, or public institutions, the treatment is the same. It is not unusual to hear persons of color complaining

about a multitude of barriers keeping them from obtaining positions at all levels in companies, corporations, and higher education institutions. Stith calls this condition “the glass ceiling.”¹³ The glass ceiling as described by Stith is an artificial barrier, based on attitudinal or organizational bias, that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organizations into management level positions. Since such treatment of people of color is practiced by institutions, there is no one individual to blame. Ethnicity, nationality, and race play a role in preventing persons of color from achieving their God-given potential.

Christianity’s mixed record on race

Historical examination reveals how Christians have differed in the nature of interaction with those not of their own group. They have based their actions, including empire building, on both their interpretation of Scripture and their worldview as influenced by other factors such as culture and ethnicity.

The Crusades were fought in the name of Christ. The “conversion” and enslavement of indigenous people of the western hemisphere was done with the cross in one hand and the sword in the other. The English colonists readily slaughtered indigenous peoples of North America as they sought their conversion to Christianity. (Of course, many more were also killed by diseases.) Many Christians justified enslavement of people with black skin as being in accordance with God’s will. During the Civil War, many Christian groups supported slavery and opposed its abolition. During the era of Jim Crow in the United States, the “white” church seldom took an open stand against the separate and unequal treatment of blacks in the South or the discriminatory housing and education policies in the North.

On the other hand, there were English colonists who treated the indigenous peoples with dignity and respect in the name of Christ. A Catholic bishop, Bartolome de las Casas, criticized the Spanish crown for its treatment of indigenous peoples. Unfortunately, this had the inadvertent result of increasing the African slave trade. In 1688, Pennsylvania Mennonites were the very first in colonial America to protest the buying and selling of African slaves as a violation of the Ten Commandments. In the 1800s, Christian groups such as the Quakers spoke out against slavery, and many of the abolitionists were avowed Christians. In the twentieth century, the Civil Rights movement was based on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s interpretation of Christian teachings.

So why do Christians have such a mixed record in regard to racism? Let us examine further the origins of the construct of race as we know it today.

Eloise Hiebert Meneses¹⁴ notes that nineteenth-century anthropologists, influenced by Darwinian evolutionary theories, searched for similar explanations regarding human physiological morphology. Just as biologists were classifying previously unknown species of plants and animals, anthropologists (Christian or not) attempted to classify populations of people according to physiological differences.

Today, society continues this practice of dividing humans into categories based on skin color and physical features, despite recent discoveries that DNA structures reveal a greater difference within racial groups than between groups.¹⁵

A growing body of research has indicated that race is no longer a physiological reality; however, race continues to exist as a social construct. Over one hundred years have passed since Darwin's theory appeared in *The Descent of Man*.¹⁶ Today scientific studies clearly have shown that the race theory is cultural rather than biological. However, white people continue to benefit from race classification or the "whiteness" ideology. In the words of Hacker:

Hence the weights Americans have chosen to give to race, in particular to the artifact of "whiteness," which set a floor on how far people of that complexion can fall. No matter how degraded their lives, white people are still allowed to believe that they possess the blood, the genes, the patrimony of superiority. No matter what happens they can never become "black." White Americans of all classes have found it comforting to preserve blacks as a subordinate caste: a presence, which despite all its pain and problems, still provides white with some solace in a stressful world.¹⁷

Just as Hacker did, other scholars and social activists in the field of race and racism continue to show that the majority of white people in this country not only believe on the superiority of whiteness, but they also understand the benefit that comes by supporting the institutionalization of the idea.

A PBS documentary *Race: the Power of an Illusion*¹⁸ revealed that most of us continue to believe that people have innate biological differences, that we enter this world divided into categories of red, black, white, or yellow. This particular program follows a dozen students, including African American athletes and Asian string players, who sequence and compare their own DNA. The participants of the study were surprised by the results. They said, "One by one, our myths and misconceptions about racial differences are tak-

en apart...” This documentary suggests that when looking at skin color differences, disease, human evolution, even genetic traits, we learn there is not one characteristic, one trait, or even a single gene that distinguishes all members of one race from another. The Apostle Paul speaking to the people of Athens affirmed the idea “one humanity” in Acts 17:26, when he said: “From one person God made every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, and he decided the allotted times and the boundaries of their habitation.”

Yet due to this fabricated idea race, Christian churches and many of their members still believe in and practice racial separation. Dr. King, speaking from his experience, said: “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning, the same hour when many are standing to sing in Washington.” Segregation was so prevalent that in 1964, the National Council of Churches formed a commission on religion and race to work on desegregation of the northern mainline churches. Findlay¹⁹ states that the program never got off the ground and in less than a year it disappeared altogether. He further notes that this was testimony to the powerful presence of racism in northern communities, through it manifested itself more openly and forcefully in the South. This philosophy of separation is rooted in the ideology of tolerance rather than acceptance. It is not hard to imagine that segregation is fueled and encouraged by institutional racism.

Today there is debate on whether Christianity is a segregated religion. Barndt²⁰ asserts the fact of racial separation. Schmidt,²¹ on the other had, declares that Christianity is not a segregated religion. The *NBC Evening News* on September 24, 2000, reminded Americans that in parts of the United States institutionalized racism clearly continues to be the law of the land. For some of us with close ties to denominations and church agencies, we know that today’s church-related institutions would not escape the blame of institutional racism, for they, too, have been using their “institutional” power to marginalize, exploit, and control people of color for years. Stith asserts the lingering effect of such institutionalized racism in this way:

...Blacks and other minorities are still feeling the symptoms of “institutional racism.” For more than four hundred years racism has existed in our country. It consists of written and unwritten laws and public policy designed to discriminate against black and other minorities. It was known as institutional racism because it was acknowledged and openly practiced by reputable institutions including public and private business, law enforcement, colleges, government officials and agencies...²²

Whites are socialized to be racist through a public discourse that continually bombards them with the desirability of whites (Barndt, Constantine & Wing Sue).²³ Even though there are governmental laws against the violation of equal opportunity policies, individual and institutional racism still persist.

I admit that for persons of color, confronting individual, institutional, or cultural racism is not an easy task. Similarly, Christians avoid mentioning racism as sin and a misinterpretation of God's teaching. Moreover, the issue of race in America is a sensitive topic that many people prefer to avoid. No one wants to be called a *racist*. As Clarence Page wrote in *Mazel*: "Racism is a sensitive word. Americans often avoid mentioning it, even when it is relevant...it is a sensitive word because it exposes so much, institutionally and personally. It is a Rorschach word, a linguistic inkblot test. How you define it reveals something important about you, how you see the world and your place in it."²⁴

Rosado asserts that racism consists of the culturally sanctioned strategies that defend the advantages of power, privilege, and prestige. To this end he writes: "Ever since the European restructuring of the world from the sixteenth century on, racism has become affirmative action for whites. It is both an attitude and an act of structural superiority, which justifies its very existence by given biological differences such as language, religion, ethnicity, or accent a negative value and meaning"²⁵

Racism goes beyond prejudice and discrimination. I believe, as others do, that racism is an ideology that transcends even bigotry, hatred, and violence. It is an assumption through which whites have used economic and political advantage for centuries at the expense of people of color. For the most part, white individuals are supported and encouraged by the current system that exploits the privilege that comes with whiteness. As Manning Marable is quoted as saying, "whiteness in a racist, corporate-controlled society is like having the image of an American Express Card...stamped on one's face: immediately you are 'universally accepted.'"²⁶ This clearly illustrates the complexity of racism today, how settled and hidden it is and how difficult for people of color to do any thing about the problem. When people of color are asked to define racism, they tend to list institutions and systems that deny them education, employment opportunities, and upward mobility where they work. This does not mean individuals are not capable of racism.

The effect of racism

It is not difficult to understand the impact of racism on people of color in

the United States and elsewhere in the world. Historically, it has involved the way society has designed the government and non-governmental institutions to exclude people of color. Katz & Taylor are particularly direct when writing about some of the historical effects of racism on all people:

Many American groups have suffered discrimination in various forms. But once again, the phenomenon for blacks is different, made so by their being the only group to experience the confluence of race, slavery, and segregation. It is race, as socially defined by British tradition, that defines black American...²⁷

The problem of racism generally speaking, and what it did to people of color in particular, is not only historical, but as Joe Klein reported in *TIME*, the problem persists. According to Klein white racism is the original American sin; it helped create the culture of poverty that existed in places like New Orleans' Ninth Ward. He goes on to say that "George W. Bush's Republican Party was reborn in racism, having sided with Southern segregationists in the 1960."²⁸ Racism is entrenched in social systems and institutions such as schools, government agencies, banks, and church organizations. In the words of Mazel: "Racism is not simply about the attitudes, dislikes and motivation of individuals or individual acts of bigotry and discrimination. Instead, racism refers to the way society as a whole is arranged, and how the economic, educational, cultural and social rewards of that society are distributed. It is about collective injustice."²⁹

While racism does not negatively affect whites as much as it does people of color, the effect of racism on whites is more perceptual and has little effect in their lives. As a result, some are unable to see all the tragedies that the black community has suffered. Racism has created a white blindness that cannot grasp the impact of racism. Many cannot see a problem with the current state of racial relations, and simply believe that blacks are in charge of their own destiny. As one student in class put it, "Many whites feel that African Americans are 'milking' the slavery issue and that the civil rights movement has eliminated the woes of the African Americans." There is a tendency to mistakenly believe that racism is the problem of the past and that blacks and whites have no reason not to live together in peace. On account of such assumptions and mindset, there is a racial gap between black and white that does not exist between any other races in the United States. Many white Americans will never fully understand the crisis that exists or even begin to imagine the crisis, because they do not feel the impact of inequality caused by racism. Some even may say they are not aware how it operates in our

current world. Because racism hides itself very effectively, white people can live their lives without even noticing any racism. There is a need to somehow dispel the myth of racism's demise so that all people, black and white, realize that racism is still a very strong force in our society.

Writers and social activists alike have documented that the effects of racism on people of color, regardless of the time period in this country's history, remain the same. The effect of such injustice is white supremacy, with its uneven distribution of privilege and wealth. These injustices are, of course, readily perceived and decried by people of color. Gerzon quoted a seventy-year-old African American, Sherwood Sanders, who stated:

I believed, in essence, that there was a white power structure that existed off the blood, sweat, and tears of black people. I didn't think about other races much at the time. It was a kind of modern, urban slavery. Whites, as I saw it, were either evil or incapable of feeling. They don't know, or don't want to know, the pain and suffering that they are causing ...³⁰

Meanwhile, today's racism at the institutional level, although perhaps less blatant and more sophisticated, results in a painful reality for persons of color. Church-related or not, institutional racism is everywhere and it cuts across the board.

At some church-related higher education institutions, attempts to introduce anti-racism training and diversity training have not only failed, but frequently have been undermined. A case in point is that at the time of this writing, I wish to reflect on my employment history of 20-plus years at church-related higher education institutions. I know too much to be quiet, am too connected not to care, and I am passionate about the issue. I am a member of Mennonite Church USA. Through the years, I have expressed my concerns about the issue of racism to my colleagues, and to presidents, deans, and board chairs. I have not only spoken about the evil of racism, but have taught classes, planned workshops, and conducted anti-racism trainings. Because of the passive-aggressive tendencies within my church culture and because of my academic freedom, I have not been silenced; however, my voice has not readily been heard.

My church, Mennonite Church USA, and the denomination that operates Fresno Pacific University, Mennonite Brethren, have talked more than most about addressing racism from the perspective of peace and justice. But I have also discovered that, church owned or not, there is no noticeable difference in the behavior of institutions when it comes to racism. A report from Mennonite Education Agency, which oversees six church colleges and universities, revealed that in the past 100 years, none of these colleges/universities and seminaries:³¹

- Has had a person of color as a president.
- Has a person of color serving at the president's cabinet level.
- Not one of them has a person of color serving as chair on the board of trustees.
- There are only three persons of color with full-time tenured faculty status in all eight church institutions.

The student population in the two denominational church-owned college/universities and seminaries (total of nine) reflects even greater disparity:

- Only one university (because of its geographical location) has about 25 percent of its student population made up of Latino students.
- The other eight institutions barely show more than 3-5 percent of the student body populations who come from any one of the student of color groups in any given year.

While there are well-qualified, highly-educated people of color with years of experience at these church institutions, top leadership continues to be occupied overwhelmingly by white males. I observed that these top-level positions are traditionally filled, for the most part, by less educated, less experienced white males aged 40-50. In my opinion, this clearly is institutional racism that contributes to the promotion of white supremacy.

When I contacted the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, an association of evangelical institutions, for similar data, my findings are even more revealing:

- Out of 120 institutions in the United States, there are no persons of color serving as president.
- Only five persons of color are at chief academic dean's level (three African American and two Asian American).

This data shows that the leadership of church colleges and universities remains in the hands of white people and is systematically segregated in many ways. When I reviewed the mission statements of some church institutions, all seem to suggest that they are about preparing leaders for the church and the world. That is, of course, well and good in theory; however, the question then is what church and which world? Will these institutions continue to think of leadership in "the white church or white world"?

A truly modeled, Christian-rooted leadership must be about change that corrects past mistakes, gives hope to the hopeless, and promotes equality and peace and justice for all. Johnnetta B. Cole stated best it when she said, "Leadership is about decisions and the speed with which one can follow a wrong one by making one that works."

While most writers on race-related issues have focused on people of color, a few are beginning to document the effect racism has on white people. Jo-

seph Barndt wrote about this impact.³² His work served as the basis for the Damascus Road training as it was developed by Crossroads Ministry for the Mennonite Church. This approach agrees with a discussion by Cornel West. He says: “To engage in a serious discussion of race in America, we must not begin with the problem of black people, but with the flaws of American society, flaws rooted in historic inequalities and longstanding cultural stereotypes.”³³

As I discuss more and explore the effect of racism with white friends who are concerned about the evils of racism, it is not unusual to hear guilt-loaded comments or confessional speeches. Some come right out and say how guilty they feel about their white privilege. Some tell powerful stories from their experiences, and the way they feel now. Nothing more is revealing than the words of McIntosh: “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.”³⁴ There is evidence to suggest that some whites have moved beyond guilt and are involved in anti-racism work, joining hands with people of color to make a difference for the new generation. People are beginning to notice racism’s impact on white people and a few white brothers and sisters are even taking leadership in some anti-racist endeavors.

For example, Barndt wrote, “...we will become aware of the ways in which racism hurts and destroys us, and how it uses us to hurt and destroy others.”³⁵ A student in my “Analysis of Racism and Power” class explained the effect of racism this way: “Many white Americans will never fully understand the crisis that exists or even know that a crisis exists, because they are not feeling the inequality biases of our society.” Another student stated:

My eyes were opened to a problem I hardly realized still existed. I’m embarrassed to say that prior to the class I thought racism was a problem of the past. Little did I know that even though it is now illegal to discriminate based on race, a more dangerous and more lethal form of racism has emerged since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.³⁶

The following are additional unedited quotes from “Analysis of Racism and Power,” a course I taught during the past six years at two Mennonite institutions. The ongoing effect of racism on all people came alive when our students began to reflect on their experiences in a weekly journal that they kept. Their reaction to correct information or misinformation, fears, frustrations, hope or the lack of it, in their own world is surprising:

“I have to strip away all the propaganda that has been fed to me for years so I can start from the beginning.”

“Learning more about white privilege has helped me understand my own experience of racism better.”

“It is hard to focus on the hope for change when dealing with such a massive dilemma.”

“I’d like to do the impossible, which would be to pair everybody up with someone of another race and make him or her hang out and be friends.”

“Perhaps the best way for me to combat the hopeless feelings that America’s racial situation today leave me with is to dive in and get involved.”

“I think it is a problem when our institutions follow and abide by constitutional practice, yet do not find all people with equal opportunity.”

“It was fascinating for me to learn that scripture seems to not only denounce anything along the lines of racism, but race is not even a concept.”

“Now I know why Malcolm X had such a deep hate for us Christian whites.”

Based upon these reflections, I recognize that racism is not simply a temporary belief that one will outgrow, but rather it is a hard-core ideology passed from generation to generation that preserves white power, unearned rights, and undeserved privileges. It is a learned behavior that is generally unnoticed by its beneficiaries until they examine it more thoroughly. However, it is clear that recognizing and dealing with racism may be a painful experience for both whites and people of color, but racist thinking is a behavior that can be unlearned.

For example, Yancey witnessed the evil treatment of African Americans by whites in the 1960s. He describes the lingering effects of racism on himself as a white observer:

Today I feel shame, remorse and also repentance. It took years for God to break the stranglehold of blatant racism in me—I wonder if any of us gets free of its more subtle forms—and I now see that sin as one of the most poisonous, which has perhaps the most toxic societal effect. When experts discuss the underclass in urban America, they blame in turn drugs, changing values, systemic poverty, and the breakdown of the nuclear family. Sometimes I wonder if all these problems are consequences of a deeper, underlying cause: our centuries-old sin of racism.³⁷

When most people think of the problem of racism, some consider it a sin, and others simply brush it off, believing that it will go away. Of course, as

we have seen so far, racism is still a major societal problem that this country that has yet to deal with effectively. I believe that for Christian churches to support and culturally endorse race as a biological difference among God's people is outright dishonest; worse yet, promoting "white supremacy" ideology is even immoral. Racism is a vocabulary that communicates not only ideology but a territory that limits certain people from reaching certain opportunities. Speaking of opportunities, (on November 26, 2004) reflecting on his past experience while narrating "Eyewitness to History," Tom Brokaw framed the past and present state of racism in America this way: "When I first began my journalism career, if my skin color was one shade different from what is now, I know then, I would not have been given all the opportunities, and I couldn't have gotten where I am now in my career. Things have not changed much now." I believe what he said is true, and yet in my opinion what Mr. Brokaw told is only half of the story; about the other half, I am left to wonder whether he contributes to the problem or not.

The influence of institutional Christianity

I believe that Christianity is good for all of us if practiced as it was meant to be. Christianity must be about equality, healing, and hope. It is about making things right and working for justice for everyone. For example, as we recently witnessed, Christian organizations from nearly every denomination were actively involved in the recent Tsunami relief work, providing food, medical supplies, and housing to those in need. In addition, the impressive response by Christian churches and agencies coupled with non-governmental organizations in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is further evidence of addressing racism. This outpouring of help and hope occurs in the name of Christianity after many other catastrophic events as well.³⁸

However, as recently as 100 years ago nations colonized, enslaved, and exploited many people in the name of Christ. In the United States, social movements of the 1950s and 1960s made some progress in moving society toward an interest in social justice. Christian churches, however, limited their involvement and did little to create awareness of equity and justice for all. The notable exception was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Although Christianity may not be different than other faiths when it comes to social involvement and direct action, it is worth noting that in 1963 it was the Protestant churches and the National Council of Churches that first became supporters of "direct action" and direct involvement with the national black community in the struggle for racial justice.³⁹ However, in the United

States white Christians were seldom cognizant of or attentive to racism until the 1960s.

Evidence suggests that Christianity as an institution has been the instigator of much injustice committed in the name of God. For example, as West states so eloquently: “as the Christian church became increasingly corrupted by state power, religious rhetoric was often used to justify imperial aims and conceal the prophetic heritage of Christianity.”⁴⁰ West further points out some of the Christian church’s collective past behavior: “...This terrible merger of church and state has been behind so many of the churches’ worst violations of Christian love and justice—from the barbaric crusades against Jews and Muslims to the horrors of the inquisition and the ugly bigotry against women, people of color, and gays and lesbians.”⁴¹

Perhaps the behavior of white churches in the South was best understood by Dr. King when he noted that white churches were uninvolved in the struggle. In King’s words, “...where were their voices when a black race took upon itself the cross of protest against man’s injustice to man? Where were their voices when defiance and hatred were called for by white men who sat in these very churches?” Out of his frustration Dr. King even questioned if white churchgoers of the South worshipped the same God he did.

I recognize that individual Christians were involved in the civil rights movement and some even gave their lives. However, as an institution, the Christian church not only remained uninvolved, but continued to act on its racist views, showing little interest in the lives and well-being of people of color. In the words of Yancey:

Yes, we have examples of St. Francis of Assisi trying to halt the Crusades, of monks who outdo Gandhi’s asceticism, of missionaries who serve the suffering, of Quakers and Anabaptists who oppose all violence. But by and large the history of European Christianity is the record of a church that relies on wealth, power, prestige, and even coercion and war to advance its cause.⁴²

Jesse Jackson’s account of racism in the South is even more explicit. He notes that as recently as 35-40 years ago Christians remained loyal to the racist system, turning away from involvement in the Civil Rights movement. In Jackson’s words:

... the insult of racial segregation remained an institution for nearly a century. Created by an economy of exploitation and greed, sustained by the politics of divide-and-rule, defended by the pronouncements of law that had no moral

foundation, **nurtured by the religion of white supremacy**, it was enforced, on a daily basis, by a police state. This is one of the fundamental lessons of the American national experience. (emphasis mine)⁴³

Jackson's observation is a good reminder that racism is imbedded in systems and institutions. The construct of race created false assumptions about the human condition. As a result racism and white supremacy flourished, giving rise to a great evil on the part of white Christians of the United States.

In addition, it became a missed opportunity by Christians and Christianity to follow a biblical invitation (Romans 12:15-18) to live peaceably with all God's people, without regard to human-created divisions.

Today, the residual of racism may be present in many forms and in many countries. To some extent, however, Christians worldwide, particularly those from the West, will not escape the blame for the origin of racism in our society. Though slavery formally halted in the U.S with the ratifications of the Thirteenth Amendment (1865), degradation of people of color continues. Furthermore, white nations continue to exhibit oppressive behavior toward black ones, even today. The late Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia spoke against racism to world leaders. On October 4, 1963, he gave a speech to the United Nations, speaking out against racism:

...until the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned; that until there are no longer any first and second class citizens of any nations; that until the color of a man's skin is of no more significance than the color of his eyes; that until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all—without regard to race—until that day, the dream of lasting peace and world citizenship and the role of international morality will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued but never attained...⁴⁴

Today, 44 years after Emperor Selassie Ethiopia appealed to the world nations, asking for equality of all people, racism is still spread widely across society and all institutions. White institutions, large and small, have the privilege to not let their guard down and disregard institutional racism for one simple reason: "power." It is the misuse of collective power that makes racism work. As Dr. King once said, "There is nothing essentially wrong with power. The problem is American power is unequally distributed."

We have the opportunity to be part of the solution. As Christians, we are called to do something about it. Perhaps it is important to note that the process of dismantling racism cannot be done in a short period of time. The

fact that it existed for more than 500 years and that it is entrenched in history means that it may take a generation or longer. It may not be possible to redeem the nation from the sin of racism without dismantling racism. As Barndt says, “we cannot build a pluralistic society without tearing down the walls of racism.”⁴⁵ A multicultural institution may be a goal, but it will not be a possibility without eliminating institutional racism.

Collectively, Christian churches must see un-doing racism as their vocation and promote peace and justice. Peace without justice will be a remote possibility in our time. In a world of today, we cannot continue to separate and isolate some because of the color of their skin. Christians are called not only to meet the spiritual needs of people, but the physical, social, and political needs of everyone. The mistakes and hurt of the past will take time to heal. The process of peace and healing from the sin of racism will even take longer, and we may run out of options, but now is the time to make things right.

Conclusion

I argue about the ever-persistent problem of racism in our nation and in the Christian churches. I also seek to encourage acknowledgment of the issue, solicit help in promoting greater understanding of racism, and request partnership in discontinuing its vicious cycle. Most of all, this is an invitation to all Christians and Christian institutions to re-examine their views of race and to begin to teach against the sin of racism for the purpose of healing and hope among all people. In addition, it is an invitation to respect and honor all of God’s children as equals and to live peaceably with all people. Perhaps the challenges to all of us will be how to respond to those who say “we are equal—there is no problem.” However, evidence shows that we are not equal in all things that matter: in the distributions of power, in the distribution of resources of income, and in the way we perceive whiteness and blackness in our society.

We have the opportunity to repent of our sins and make it right. Christianity and the institutional church must embrace the task of reconciliation. It is possible to complete the unfinished work of the Christian Church and to engage humanity in the work of reconciliation. The time has come for the Christian church to begin institutional change and provide creative leadership that promotes love not hate, collaboration not selfishness, and most of all, human equality not superiority. As Dr. King said, “Light has come into the world, and every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructiveness.” Christians have unique

opportunities to systemically change the way most white people control, use, and abuse the power of institutions they created and operate. The country is divided by wealth, race, and ethnicity due to practice of white supremacy. We need to think of an inclusive model of leadership that does not discriminate based on skin color. The persistence of human suffering, poverty, and inequality in “this so-called Christian nation” depends partly on the quality of future leadership that the Christian church provides. This new generation of leaders must be sensitive to the needs of all God’s people. Churches can and should begin the development of future leaders by identifying the problem of racism. I hope that the Christian church of today and its members are ready for the challenge, prepared to acknowledge past mistakes, and poised to move forward to develop a new generation of church leaders.

Acknowledging and naming the problem will take us one step closer to finding the solution. A case in point: President George W. Bush, in his speech during the 50th anniversary of Supreme Court Decision *Brown v. the Board of Education* named the problem, and he said, “the habits of racism in America have not been broken.” His acknowledgment of a major societal issue by a national leader will give our country the impetus and legitimacy to change the pattern of entrenched racism. It will make it easier for people to discuss an issue that most people do not want to talk about publicly. Bush also appointed African American and other persons of color to key cabinet posts.

Today it is not unusual to find churches and church institutions that oppress people of color by undermining their presence and disempowering them structurally. Recognizing and naming the problem may be the first positive step toward peace, but more is needed to dismantle the sin of racism. For Christians who believe in white supremacy to change, and for people of color to forgive, is to move in the right direction toward rebuilding the broken relationships. However, without change in the power structure, people of color cannot challenge the ideology of white supremacy in our culture. Central and critical to this anti-racism process is the transformation of the church and the church’s power structure. The church’s teaching the theology of peacemaking without providing the tools for anti-racism process is not sufficient.

Finally, moving white Christians from being non-racist to engaging them in anti-racism endeavors will be difficult and will take a long time. Meaningful anti-racism work is possible if Christian churches will move away from a false biological identity, which is whiteness, and exclusive cultural identity, which is European, toward an inclusive theological and spiritual identity,

which is the family of God. In Acts 17:26, Paul provides such a model when he said in Athens: “From one ancestor he made every nation to inhabit the whole earth.” Now all Bible-reading Christians must face and confess if they don’t understand what is not included in the term “every”. Unless Christians choose to believe Scriptures selectively, the Bible is clear that the word “every” means all humans without labeling them by color. Racism that is not confronted will continue to harm all people and ultimately hinders our earthly goal: the expansion of God’s kingdom. It has been said that race may be an illusion but “racism” is real.

NOTES

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¹⁴ Elois H. Meneses, “Race and Ethnicity; an Anthropological Perspective,” *Race, Sex and Class*, (1994):137-146.

- ¹⁵ Larry Adelman, executive producer, C. Herbes-Sommers, episode producer, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, PBS documentary, (Burlington: California Newsreel, 2003).
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- ¹⁸ Larry Adelman, executive producer, C. Herbes-Sommers, episode producer, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, PBS documentary, (Burlington: California Newsreel, 2003).
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