

REFLECTIONS ON WHITE RACISM

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TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF RACISM IN AMERICA, ONE SOON REALIZES THAT THE MORES OF TODAY'S SOCIETY, IN RELATION TO PROBLEMS BETWEEN THE RACES, TOOK ROOT WITH THE AMERICAN COLONISTS, AND CONTINUES RIGHT ON THROUGH THE CIVIL WAR DOWN TO THE PRESENT DAY.

ADMITTING THAT RACISM IS AN OLD PROBLEM, HOWEVER, SUGGESTS THAT THE BLAME IS NOT OURS--THE BLAME BELONGS TO THOSE WHO HAVE COME BEFORE US. WE MUST SEE THAT IT WAS THEIR PROBLEM IN THEIR DAY. WE HAVE INHERITED THEIR PROBLEM AND COMPOUNDED IT BY OUR OWN UNWILLINGNESS TO CONFRONT IT IN OUR DAY.

FOR US AS WHITE PEOPLE TO REFLECT ON WHITE RACISM IS ADMITTEDLY A DIFFICULT PROCESS FOR IT MEANS THAT WE ADMIT THAT WE HAVE BEEN BROUGHT UP IN A SOCIETY THAT HAS EDUCATED US, FORMALLY THROUGH OUR INSTITUTIONS AND INFORMALLY THROUGH OUR LIVING, TO BE RACIST. THE REAL TRAGEDY IS THAT MOST OF THE TIME WE DID NOT KNOW WHAT WAS HAPPENING. THE FACT THAT WHITE IS BETTER THAN BLACK WAS NEVER REALLY QUESTIONED. THE SUBTLETIES OF "PURE AS SNOW" AND BLACK AS TAR" GOT TRANSFERED TO THE HUMAN FAMILY IN MANY WAYS. THAT WAS A "BLACK DEED" YOU DID. "NIGGER" WAS WHAT YOU CALLED A BLACK PERSON AND WITH IT CAME THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THAT MEANT DIRTY, IGNORANT, NOT TO BE TRUSTED, ANIMAL LIKE. THE BLACK MAN WAS NOT CONSIDERED A PART OF SOCIETY. HIS ROLE WAS NOT MUCH DIFFERENT FROM THE MULE OR THE TRACTOR. IN THE SOUTH HE WAS TO BE TAKEN CARE OF LIKE YOU CARED FOR YOUR OTHER POSSESSIONS, I.E., CATTLE, AND WORK EQUIPMENT.

IN THE NORTH HE WAS TOLD "THE DOOR IS OPEN", BUT SOMEHOW IT ALWAYS GOT SLAMMED JUST BEFORE HE GOT IN.

TODAY THE SITUATION IS NOT DIFFERENT. A FEW BLACKS HAVE "MADE IT", BUT THE LARGER MAJORITY ARE STILL OUTSIDE OF SOCIETY. CAPITAL FOR BLACK BUSINESS IS HARD TO GET. FOR EXAMPLE, THE CHURCH IS WILLING TO HELP FINANCE INDIVIDUAL BLACK BUSINESSES, BUT NOT BROADLY BASED CORPORATIVES. TO PUSH BLACK CAPITALISM IS RACISM. THE EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES IN THE BOARDS AND AGENCIES ONLY NEED TO BE LOOKED AT AND WE SEE RACISM. HOW MANY OF OUR INSTITUTIONS, SUCH AS HOSPITALS, HOMES FOR CHILDREN AND THE AGING, INSTITUTIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION, AND, YES, CONFERENCE BOARDS AND AGENCIES HAVE ANY SIGNIFICANT REPRESENTATION OF BLACK PEOPLE, BROWN PEOPLE, OR RED PEOPLE EMPLOYED? WHAT ARE THE EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES OF THE COMPANIES OUR CHURCH DOES BUSINESS WITH. NOT TO KNOW THESE FACTS IS RACISM. THE DANGER THAT WE AS WHITE CHURCHMEN FACE IS NOT KNOWING THE FACTS, BUT WHEN WE SEE THEM A DEEPER DANGER IS NOT SPEAKING AND ACTING OUT WAYS TO CORRECT THEM.

COMMENTING ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF FINDING A SOLUTION TO THE RACISM IN THE UNITED STATES, FRANK H. JOYCE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE AGAINST RACISM, STATES THAT:

"THE FIRST STEP IN THE SOLUTION OF ANY PROBLEM IS ITS CORRECT DEFINITION. TO THIS DAY WHITES HAVE ATTEMPTED TO DEVISE A REALISTIC DEFINITION OF THE RACE PROBLEM. THE TASK HAS BEEN FUNDAMENTALLY EVADED BY THE BELIEF THAT THE RACE PROBLEM IS A NEGRO PROBLEM. IN FACT, WHITES DO NOT HAVE A WHITE PROBLEM. EVEN THOSE, SUCH AS THE KERNER COMMISSION, WHO HAVE RECENTLY BEGUN TO RECOGNIZE RACISM IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY, DIRECT THEIR RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS, NOT AT WHITE AMERICANS, BUT AT REFORMS FOR BLACK AMERICA. SUCH REFORMS ARE OBVIOUSLY PREVENTED BY THE VERY RACISM WHICH CREATED THE NEED FOR REFORMS IN THE FIRST PLACE. WHAT IS REQUIRED IS AN ANALYSIS OF WHITE SUPREMACY--HOWEVER CRUDE AS THIS STAGE--AND A STRATEGY AND PROGRAM FOR COMBATTING IT."

AGAIN, ONE MAJOR PROBLEM FOR INDIVIDUALS AND/OR GROUPS, SUCH AS THE CHURCH, IS TO ADMIT THAT WE ARE RACISTS. AFTER THIS ADMISION IS MADE, WE MUST THEN CONTINUE TO DEAL WITH THE RACIST PSYCHOLOGY WHICH ENGULFS US AT EVERY TURN.

MR. JOYCE CONTINUES TO TALK ABOUT RACISM BY SAYING:

"FIRST, A DISTINCTION MUST BE MADE BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL RACISM. SECOND, THE MAIN DIFFICULT DIFFERENTIATION MUST BE MADE BETWEEN WHAT MIGHT BE TERMED ATTITUDINAL AND BEHAVIORAL RACISM." 2

THE FOLLOWING ARE EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF RACISM:

- A. INDIVIDUAL RACISM IS REPRESENTED IN THE BOMBING OF A BIRMINGHAM CHURCH, WHICH RESULTED IN THE DEATH OF FOUR BLACK CHILDREN.
- B. INSTITUTIONAL (SYSTEMATIC) RACISM IS REPRESENTED IN THE DEATHS OF 500 BLACK INFANTS IN THE SAME CITY, COMPARED TO THE MUCH LOWER INFANT MORTALITY RATE AMONG WHITES.
- C. ATTITUDINAL RACISM IS DEFINED AS ANY ACTION TAKEN AGAINST PEOPLE OF COLOR SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT WHITE.
- D. BEHAVIORAL RACISM MAY BE DEFINED AS ANY ACTION, INDIVIDUAL OR INSTITUTIONAL, WHICH DISADVANTAGES NON-WHITES TO THE ADVANTAGE OF WHITES, REGARDLESS OF CONSCIOUS MOTIVATION. 3

AT THIS POINT, I WOULD CHALLENGE US TO SIT FOR A WHILE AND PONDER THESE DEFINITIONS. THINK FOR YOURSELF, AND SEE IF YOU CAN GIVE CONCRETE EXAMPLES THAT FIT THESE DEFINITIONS. IF YOU HAVE TROUBLE THINKING OF EXAMPLES, IT MAY JUST BE THAT THIS IS THE REASON WE ARE FACED WITH THE PROBLEM.

TO THOSE OF US IN THE CHURCH, THE DOOR TO TRUE CONFESSION AND REPENTENCE IS OPEN. WE HAVE "ALLOWED" BLACKS TO COME TO OUR WHITE CHURCH. HOWEVER, IN THE SOUTH, WE HAVE NOT REALLY EVEN "ALLOWED" BLACKS TO COME. NO, BUT THEY CAME ANYWAY, AND MOST OF THE TIME, THEY WERE TURNED AWAY.

I WAS ONCE APPROACHED BY A WHITE CLERGYMAN IN THE SOUTH AND ASKED IF I COULD GET SOME BLACKS TO ATTEND HIS CHURCH. TO TALK OF MERGERS IS NOT THE SAME AS TALKING ABOUT BLACKS COMING TO OUR WHITE CHURCHES.

HOWEVER, TO PURGE THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH OF RACISM MAY BE POSSIBLE, IF WE CAN ACCEPT ALL MEN--WITHOUT REGARD TO THEIR COLOR --INSTEAD OF ACCEPTING THEM IN SPITE OF IT.

TO BECOME SERIOUS ABOUT RACISM, IN ORDER TO BE THE TRUE CHURCH OF OUR LORD IS THE MOST PERPLEXING CHALLENGE THAT THE INSTITUTION HAS FACED IN 2,000 YEARS--IF IN FACT, WE ARE FACING IT!

ALL OVER THE UNITED STATES, WE MUST SHARPEN OUR SENSES, AND BE WILLING TO PURGE OURSELVES OF BOTH OUR CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS RACISM.

TO CREATE A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE WHO COME TOGETHER AS EQUALS IN ORDER TO ADDRESS THEMSELVES TO THE PROBLEMS OF LIVING AND CELEBRATING LIFE, IS NOT EASY.

TO CREATE A COMMUNITY WHERE ALL CAN AFFIRM THEIR PAST AND LOOK TO THE FUTURE BY REALIZING THE VALUE OF THE PRESENT, IS NOT EASY.

IT IS TO THIS TASK, OF CREATING SUCH A COMMUNITY, THAT WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN CALLED. THE URGENCY OF THE CALL IN OUR DAY MANIFESTS ITSELF IN OUR INABILITY TO RESPOND TO IT. THIS EXPOSURE HAS COME THROUGH THE SIT-INS, DEMONSTRATIONS, AND VARIOUS OTHER FORMS OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE--ALL OF WHICH HAVE RESULTED IN THE DEMANDS OF THE PEOPLE OF COLOR. FURTHER, THESE LEGITIMATE EXPOSURES ARE JUDGMENTS WHICH SHOW US OUR POSSIBILITIES.

THEY ARE JUDGMENTS FOR US, BECAUSE AS A WHITE CHURCH, WE HAVE

NOT MADE SUBSTANTIAL EFFORTS TO MEET THESE DEMANDS. THEY ARE POSSIBILITIES BECAUSE THEY COULD BE OUR LAST CHANCE TO ADOPT AND ENACT CONCRETE PROGRAMS WHICH WILL HELP TO RECTIFY THE FAILURES OF THE PAST. RECOGNITION OF OUR RACISM IS THE FIRST STEP. CONFESSION IS A SECOND STEP. ACTS OF REPENTENCE IS THE THIRD.

AS LEADERS, WE MUST SEE OUR ROLE AS ONE OF CREATING AN INCLUSIVE CHURCH. THERE CAN BE NO SUCH CHURCH AS LONG AS WE REFUSE TO DEAL WITH OUR RACISM. THE "WHY MARY, I DON'T THINK OF YOU AS A NEGRO" ATTITUDE MUST BE DEALT WITH EFFECTIVELY.

"LIKE MUCH OF AMERICAN SOCIETY, RACISM IS A MATTER OF SUBTLE AND NOT-SO-SUBTLE EUPHEMISM. AN ELABORATE RHETORIC EXISTS TO DISGUISE IT. SCHOOLS ARE SEGREGATED NOT TO KEEP BLACK SEPARATE, BUT TO PRESERVE THE NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL. POLICE ARE GIVEN EXCESSIVE POWER IN THE GHETTO NOT TO DENY BASIC CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS TO SECOND CLASS CITIZEN BLACK PEOPLE, BUT TO STOP "CRIME IN THE STREETS". BLACKS ARE NOT DENIED JOBS BECAUSE OF THEIR SKIN COLOR, BUT BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT "QUALIFIED". HOUSING INTEGRATION IS NOT OPPOSED BECAUSE PEOPLE DO NOT WISH TO LIVE NEXT DOOR TO "NIGGERS". BUT BECAUSE BLACK PEOPLE LOWER PROPERTY VALUES. BLACK STUDENTS, IT IS ARGUED, FAIL TO LEARN IN GHETTO SCHOOLS, NOT BECAUSE THE SCHOOLS ARE INFERIOR, BUT BECAUSE THE BLACK STUDENTS ARE INFERIOR BY VIRTUE OF "CULTURAL DISADVANTAGEMENT" AND A POOR HOME ENVIRONMENT." 4

THESE EUPHEMISMS AND OTHER DEVICES BY WHICH WE HAVE ABSOLVED OURSELVES FROM THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR RACISM MUST NO LONGER BE ALLOWED TO BLIND US.

THE WAR HAS BEEN DECLARED. WE IN THE CHURCH CAN NO LONGER CLAIM IMMUNITY. WE MUST MOVE QUICKLY AND WITH DETERMINED COMMITMENT TO THE GOAL OF INCLUSIVENESS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT.