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The tradition of racism in the USA

topics:

- slavery and racism
- political concept of “reconstruction” and “integration” in the USA

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Racism in America

Doing a workshop on Racism in America is a very difficult task for me. It is difficult because there are so many facets of this dreadful social ill that it is mind-boggling to try to put it in any kind of perspective. It is difficult because I believe that an hour and a half of discussing this topic will bare little fruit in terms of resolution. It is difficult because it is not an historical problem that existed a long time ago, but a current situation that I and many others must face every day. Talking about it simply brings to mind the fact that we hear, see, smell, experience racist pollutants in our environment all of the time. The only relief that I feel sometimes, is to escape the reality of this situation by not dwelling on it or thinking about it. And so to organise my thoughts into a presentation has been a tremendous challenge for me.

It is not a challenge from which I shrink, but a recognisably humbling experience that I have felt called to have on many occasions, the experience of standing in the gap between the oppressors (the racists) and the targets (the victims of racism). Because of my sense of calling and purpose and because of my choice to be a leader in society, I feel it is my duty to rise to the occasion of sensitising others to the plight of this disease which affects us all. The disease of which I speak, which has been at epidemic proportions in the United States for centuries, is none other than the de-humanising, demoralising and degrading disease of racism.

What is racism? However we define racism, such as one race hating or despising another, one race feeling superior to another, one race being better than another, etc. etc., the one thing that is constant in any true definition of racism is that one race has power over the other race. Without the ability to control, diminish and/or demolish a race, racism cannot exist. Along with the negative attitudes, the negative feelings, the philosophical concept, the moral precepts and, yes, the theological constructs about a race, the one outstanding factor that does not exist in many other situations is the fact that the race that embraces these feelings and attitudes about another race also has the power to control the race that it despises.

In answer to the question, what is racism, Dr. George Kelsey, in a profound book entitled *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (1966) states that: “Ra-

cism is a faith. It is a form of idolatry... In its early modern beginnings, racism was a justificatory device. It did not emerge as a faith. It arose as an ideological justification for the constellations of political and economic power which were expressed in colonialism and slavery. But gradually the idea of the superior race was heightened and deepened in meaning and in value so that it pointed beyond the historical structures of relation, in which it emerged, to human existence itself.” In her book *Race: Science and Politics* (rev. ed. 1947), Ruth Benedict expands on the theme of defining racism as “the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to hereditary inferiority and another group is destined to hereditary superiority. It is the dogma that the hope of the civilisation depends upon eliminating some races and keeping others pure. It is the dogma that one race has carried progress throughout human history and can alone insure future progress.” Martin Luther King jr. in his book *Where Do We Go From There: Chaos or Community* (1967) says, “since racism is based on the dogma that the hope of civilisation depends upon eliminating some races and keeping others pure, its ultimate logic is genocide. Hitler, in his mad and ruthless attempt to exterminate the Jews, carried the logic of racism to its ultimate tragic conclusion.” King goes on to say “racism is a philosophy based on contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the centre of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission.”

And so we understand racism to be an ideology, a dogma, a faith by which people live. In its ultimate practice, millions of lives have been destroyed mercilessly and even more millions are held in daily bondage and are victimised by the mind set of the race that is in the dominate position.

Racism is different from prejudice. Prejudice is a learned attitude and feeling that one person has towards another or another group of people. In many ways it looks like the same thing as racism, except that it is born of an internal feeling and does not require the one who feels the prejudice to have power over the other. Prejudice exists in the hearts and minds of both the oppressor and the oppressed. However, racism is often devoid of any feeling at all. An ideology does not necessarily require the person holding it to have any personal feeling about it at all. It is a common thing that racist behaviour and practices are acted out without any personal bias or malice in the consciousness of the one who is being racist.

The school teacher that says to the African American child, “you should take general math instead of algebra because algebra will be too difficult for you”, may indeed be trying to protect the child, but is fostering a racist position. The friend who says, “I like you very much and would love to take you home with me, but my neighbours would have a fit”, may not intend any put-down, but is yielding to racist behaviours and tactics. A person representing an institution may reject one based on race by saying, “it is not my personal feeling and I honestly believe it’s wrong, but it is the policy”, is still being racist in spite of the fact that he or she may not have personal prejudice as the primary motivate of his/her behaviour.

Dr. Valerie A. Batts, a psychologist who does workshops on what she calls “The New Racism”, says the new racism is more dangerous than the old racism. In the old days you knew how people felt and they stood their ground for whatever their ideals and philosophies were. If you wanted to address the issue you knew exactly who to go to and who you had to deal with. In new racism the person is rarely identified. New racism is institutional. It is designed and maintained by a board, committee, or some kind of policy making group. Once the policy is formed, the

committee disbands and nobody claims responsibility for its creation. When the policy is confronted, nobody has the power to reverse it or to even discuss its ethics, morals or injustice. Those who are hired to enforce the policy, do so without any personal conviction one way or the other; their only concern is to please the institution who pays their salary. This allows racism to go on and on unchecked, perpetuating itself endlessly. I will talk more about new racism later. Let me speak now about the birth of racism.

Racism as we have experienced it in the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of our world. There has always been slavery and class systems throughout the world for as long as we are aware. However, the kind of dehumanising and demoralising slavery and racism that we experienced in the slavery in the United States had its origin in the 15th century. Before that period of time, while there was a consciousness of race and colour, it was primarily to identify persons and the origin of their birth, rather than to belittle them or suggest that they were inferior to any one else. Most of the biblical characters were of African decent (in spite of the fact that the Bible has been tampered with in such a fashion as to lead persons to believe that biblical characters were some other race) but racism was never an issue in biblical times. Five hundred years ago Columbus was credited with discovering America. That credit is assigned to Columbus as though this was a land totally uninhabited. That is a racist notion in itself, that a land inhabited by Native Americans and people of African decent could be discovered by someone else. The powers that be (the racist powers) decided for political and economical reasons that the fact that people were living here when Columbus came does not count; hence Columbus is credited with discovering a land that was already known about for thousands of years.

The origin of racism

The origin of racism is inextricably tied to colonialism. Long before the colonial period, Europeans visited Africa for the benefit of what they could learn: mathematics, science, art, astrology and medicine. All of these things were far advanced in Africa before the common era. At the beginning of the colonial period, however, Europeans who went to Africa observed African culture from a distance. They drew conclusions from what they saw and heard and wrote about it when they returned home. For example, when visitors to Africa saw a healing taking place from some distance, they interpreted the dancing, chanting and animated movements of the healer to be crazy nonsense. They called the healers witch doctors. Being on the outside looking in, they were not aware that these “witch doctors” were really holy men and women who had spent a minimum of 20 years of the most rigorous, sacrificial and disciplined training to be able to perform those healing exercises that were observed. This kind of misinformation and negative interpretation of experiences in Africa led journalists and human scientists to write extreme derogatory descriptions of African life, culture and religion.

Much of what was written was not taken seriously until some religious leaders added to the damaging reports theological and christological dogma that supported the ideologies of African people as subhuman, descendants from apes and lacking the soul that would bring them under the umbrella of God’s saving grace. Once the clergy began to denounce African people as more animal than human, and if human at all, certainly not to the same degree as Caucasian people, racism was born and christened in the name of superiority and greed.

The need for racism in America

It was necessary to identify a people that were sub-human and at the same time were intelligent enough to follow the instructions of a land owner who was trying to generate wealth with his property. With the colonial expansion was a new land ripe for growing cotton and other things which began a world wide textile business in the United States. It is interesting to note that racism was not limited to people of the African diaspora, but also included Chinese, Native Americans and Irish. All of these races were involved in the tremendous textile industry that was developed in the southern part of the United States and it was through racism that labour was made available to do the work.

In the case of African people, the slave trade became an international industry. As more and more cotton was grown and the textile industry continued to flourish, there was a greater and greater need for more labour to do the work. Even though slaves represented the cheapest labour that could be found (no labour cost), every effort was made to transport as many slaves at one time as a ship could possibly hold. They were packed in the lower part of the ship like sardines. The living conditions were so inhumane that millions of them did not survive the journey. Some estimate 30 millions lives were lost in the slave trade.

Tradition of racism

Racism was created because of a system of economy that required cheap labour. It was only with the ideology that one race was superior to another and that people of African decent were not really human, that made slavery able to continue and expand. In time the practice of slavery was challenged by persons who considered it barbaric, inhumane, immoral and sinful. The more slavery was attacked by those who wanted to end it, the more it was necessary to entrench racism in people's minds to justify what was going on. Racism soon became a broader tool than just one to support slavery. It became a tool to make one race feel better about itself. It became a part of the educational system and the acculturation of a total society. Racism became the tradition of the south in the US and around the world. Even persons who had never encountered a person of African decent personally, had heard the damaging reports about people of colour. The conclusions that were drawn and the comments that were made were presented to a world wide public as fact rather than ideologies. Laws were made to protect the tradition of racism and each racist considered it his or her responsibility to teach their own children how to be good racists.

After the Civil War ended in 1865, the economical system changed slightly; it changed from a system of slavery to serfism. The term for serfism in the United States was "share cropper". A share cropper was one who worked on a plantation owned by someone of the other race and would grow crops in the field. During the planting season, the share cropper would be loaned the seeds and tools for growing the crop in the field. Sometimes it was necessary to accept food on account while they waited for the harvest to come in. At harvest time the share cropper was allowed to retain a certain portion of the harvest as his own. However, before he was allowed to realize anything for himself and his family, he would have to pay off the account that had developed as he needed supplies to grow the crops. In

most cases there was nothing left and the share cropper had to work the land another year to pay what he owed. This cycle went on and on to no end.

Reconstruction

There was a period of reconstruction in which the government sent troops to the south to protect the rights of the former slaves and other black people in the south. Once blacks obtained the right to vote, they were able to make laws that brought justice to them for a short period of time. By now racism was so entrenched that the whites were not willing to accept blacks as equals. Within ten to fifteen years the troops were removed and the political system was corrupted sufficiently to exclude most of the blacks from voting and consequently retained the power of the whites in the south. While blacks were in the majority by far, they met with resistance to exercising their political rights.

Some of the ways in which whites control the system was to establish a pole tax. Unless the blacks were able to pay the pole tax, they were not able to register to vote. Another way was to require blacks to answer a questionnaire, which would determine whether they were literate enough to vote. Since they had been denied the right to read and write in slavery, many of them were unable to even read the forms much less fill them out. Even for those who were literate, they could not answer the questions on the form because in many cases there was no answer to the question. For example, one of the questions was, "How many bubbles are in a bar of soap?" So while reconstruction seemed to offer great promise to black people for a very short time, by the turn of the century those gains had been taken away and controls had been established to maintain the tradition of racism in America. Jim Crow laws were established to maintain racism.

Where ever whites failed to gain the advantage that they wanted through legal, political and economic means, they resorted to horrendous violence. The Ku Klux Klan, an organisation of people who covered themselves in white sheets and hoods and roamed at night, used armed force to resist any efforts on blacks to gain equality in the United States. The KKK became a national organisation and because their identity was not known, included people of high standing in the community and who held high political offices. While their symbol of terror was to burn crosses in the yards of black people, they were known to burn down people's houses, shoot them down in cold blood, lynch them by hanging them from a tree limb, drown them in ponds and rivers, mutilate their bodies, especially by castration, rape women, and generally terrorise them in any way they could. Whenever blacks tried to defend themselves, they became the victims of viscous lies which welded the white community together against them which was responsible for the death of many blacks. Most of the atrocities that blacks experience in this country right up to the 1950s resulted in little or no legal action against the perpetrators of the evil.

Industrial period

In the early part of the 19th century we entered into an industrial period in the United States. Now the labour was needed not in the cotton fields in the south, but in factories in the north. Many blacks migrated from the south to northern cities where they found employment in the most deplorable situations imaginable. They

worked in factories all day like they used to work in the fields, but they were paid a wage and were protected by the law from being split up from their families. But the tradition of racism made an adjustment during the industrial period. The question of whether a black man was a man in the eyes of the law had been answered. But their lingered the question as to whether a black man was inferior to a white man. Because the later attitude was accepted by most, blacks were allowed to work in the lowest, most menial jobs that were available to anybody. Under rare circumstances were they ever able to work their way up to a higher position. While racism continued to be blatant in the south, it was covert in the north. However, racism was the same attitudinally wherever a black person would go.

During the great depression, persons who had wealth and lost it often committed suicide. Blacks, who were used to not having anything anyway, continued to do their menial tasks and survive during the depression. When the first world war began, there was a decision not to give weapons to blacks on foreign soil because they may have sided with the enemy. Racists have always believed that if blacks were ever allowed to gain any power, that they would immediately turn against their white oppressors in response to all of the hate and destruction we have suffered. Because of the necessity for soldiers however, black units were developed that fought bravely in the first world war. By the time of the second world war, not only did we have black units fighting in the war, but a black unit of air fighters was created. It was not long after that that the US Military was integrated, but racism continued to exist even with the integration.

Integration

During the 1950s a strong move by the NAACP to integrate all America began. it was understood and accepted by many blacks in the country that the total problem of racism was due to segregation. If everyone was integrated, racism would have to die. It was during the 1950s that Martin Luther King Jr. began to move against racism in favour of integration. This integration movement spilled over into the 1960s in which a liberal agenda began to be raised. This liberal agenda sought to gain everything from repayment for slave labour through the centuries, all the way to total equality for blacks in the country and access to everything that existed. You watched on television how the efforts of the civil rights marches and agendas were resisted by fire hoses, dogs, police brutality and the Ku Klux Klan. By the 1970s a number of doors and windows in the society had been sprung open for anybody, including, and in some cases especially, blacks to go through. Access to educational institutions, access to career opportunities, access to houses in neighbourhoods that had been closed to blacks, access to political office and access to dreams of the future were enjoyed for a while.

By the 1980s a conservative movement had begun which sought to undue all of the gains that had been made by black people in America from the 1960s and forward. Efforts that had been made to accommodate blacks who had been unfairly denied privilege in early years, were turned back by those who felt that enough had been done to make up for past injustices. It was during this period of time that Dr. Batts developed her theory of the new racism.

New face of destructivisms

Dr. Valerie Batts suggests that racism is only one of the destructive “isms” in our country; just as destructive as racism is classism, sexism, ageism, and ethnocentrism. She says because the new isms are not personal but institutional, three problems exist that make racism worse today than it was years ago: 1) it is harder to identify the perpetrator, 2) there is no personal guilt or responsibility, and 3) it is more difficult to change.

Batts suggests that the new racism is a co-operative system. In this co-operative system both the oppressor and the oppressed are participants in keeping the system alive. It is true that racism has been the standard for so long that many victims of racism believe in it as truth. Because of the ideologies surrounding the new racism it is easy to see how the system perpetuates itself with the assistance of both the targets and the oppressors. Batts suggests five dynamics of oppression that are responded to by five corresponding dynamics:

OPPRESSOR

dysfunctional rescuing

blaming the victim

avoidance of contact

denial of cultural differences

denial of political significance of cultural differences

TARGET

system beating

system blaming

anti-white, avoidance of contact

denial of blackness

not understanding or minimising of political significance of racial oppression

What needs to be done

What we can do is listed under three headings. 1) Individual, 2) institutional, 3) societal.

As an *individual* there are two things we can do, one is to change our personal attitude. However, a change of personal attitude does little to change a system of racism. It is important that each individual not only change his or her personal attitude, but also influence changes in the institution with which they are connected: such as school, church, work, government, community and social affairs.

Speaking *institutionally* the kinds of changes that need to be made is a change of policies and/or enforcing the policies that already exist. Another institutional change that is necessary to eliminate racism is affirmative action. Often people define affirmative action as exclusive opportunity for blacks to gain access to something from which they have been denied. That is true in part, however, the overarching definition of affirmative action is opening up the system to everybody and accepting the best qualified person. The need for affirmative action is due to racism and the “good old boys system”. In the good old boys system opportunities that become available are not advertised publicly and only a select few people are aware that the opportunity even exists. Even if others become aware of the opportunity and make effort to take advantage of it, the good old boys system is one of accepting friends, those to whom we owe favours, persons like themselves or

anybody that is not black. Affirmative action is a correction to this kind of system and makes the system more fair and equitable for everyone.

The way to change racism in our *society* is to use all of the power we have in the political system to demand that laws be passed that will eliminate racism. The US is a system of laws and persons do not change unless the law requires them to do so. In spite of all of the education that has been done around the benefits of wearing seat belts while riding in an automobile, many people, including myself, did not wear seat belts on a regular basis until wearing a seat belt became the law. The same thing is true about racism. People do not change their attitudes unless the law requires them to. The next thing we need to do on a societal basis is to educate ourselves and especially our children. Racism has been able to continue because parents have passed it down to their children, teachers have passed it on to children in school, pastors have passed it on to congregations and community leaders have passed it on to those who follow them. We need to re-educate our society, especially in our homes where children are young enough to learn the difference in love and hate.

Racism began 500 years ago because there were people who benefited from it economically. It continues today because there are still people who benefit from racism. Plato said, “what is honoured in the country will be cultivated there.” Racism will continue to exist as long as our greed is more important than our morality.