

# Racism and Adventist Theology

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My effort here to identify the features of Seventh-day Adventist theology that seem to engender racial prejudice in the adherents of the church pivots on the *why* of prejudice, a complex problem sociologists, psychologists, and theologians continue to debate. In order to provide what I consider an adequate analysis, I will discuss this matter of prejudice from a psychosocial perspective, examine it as a moral problem, and finally, analyze it theologically.

## PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

As a theological ethicist concerned with the question of prejudice, I am constrained to use the descriptive factualism of social scientists, who have made the province of race relations their particular domain, especially in America. Whereas Christian theologians have given relatively little attention to this problem, many detailed studies have come from sociologists and psychologists independent of religious motivation.

A further reason for appropriating the insights of social scientists on this matter is that I believe the God of Creation (a point which will be elaborated later) is active in history, and that he uses varied avenues to reveal truths. Thus, the social scientists are "thinking God's thoughts after him" as they retrace and confirm the results of sin in human experience, for history is "the laboratory of the abstract ideas of theology and ethics." If theology is to speak redemptively to man's racial tensions, Christian ethics needs the empirical factualism of sociology. It is at this point that creative dialogue should be initiated between the two disciplines.

The painstaking accumulation and analysis of the facts of racial configuration, of the manifold cultural factors affecting prejudice, of the types of discrimination, and the

various studies in the reduction of prejudice, all provide data highly valuable for the Christian in his understanding of the permissive and constrictive conditions in which his actions have to be made as a human being of one race dealing with persons of other races.<sup>1</sup>

Of the several works dealing with the problem, Gordon W. Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice* seems to give the most comprehensive coverage of the literature and the recurring determinants of prejudice as they appear in such literature. Elaborating on the sociocultural and psychosocial forces converging on the individual, influencing his behavior, Allport writes:

A person acts with prejudice in the first instance because he perceives the object of prejudice in a certain way. But he perceives it in a certain way partly because his personality is what it is. And his personality is what it is chiefly because of the way he was socialized (training in family, school, neighborhood). The existing social situation is also a factor in his socialization and may also be a determinant of his perceptions. Behind these forces lie other valid but more remote causal influences. They involve the structure of society in which one lives, long-standing economic and cultural traditions, as well as national and historical influences of long duration. While these factors seem so remote as to be alien to the immediate psychological analysis of prejudiced acts, they are, nonetheless, important causal influences.<sup>2</sup>

Allport claims that six determinants of prejudice recur among theorists dealing with the problem.

1. The *historical approach* looks to history for the roots of prejudice. Proponents of this theory see the only adequate explanation for racial conflicts, especially in America, in the background of slavery and the failure of reconstruction in the South after the Civil War.

2. The *sociocultural theory* looks to such factors as tradition, upward mobility, density of population, and group contact for the seeds of prejudice. The pressure of urbanization, which throws many groups together, increases anxiety and exposes people to what is inhuman and impersonal, such as the struggle for goods, luxury, and status.

3. The *situational theory*, espoused by such writers as Lillian Smith in her book *Killers of the Dream*, reflects a kind of "atmosphere theory." Children grow up surrounded by influences which they naturally reflect, without knowledge of historical precedents of exploitation. Their racial acculturation is primarily accomplished by their immediate social milieu.

- 4 The *psychodynamic emphasis*, in contrast to the preceding theories, approaches prejudice from a predominantly psychological perspective: prejudice is rooted in the nature of man and includes such dynamics as frustration, deprivation, and projection.

5. The *phenomenological emphasis* perceives the convergence of histor-

ical and cultural forces on the individual. Character structure and situational factors all come into final focus on the individual. Essentially, the phenomenological approach suggests that a person's conduct springs directly from his view of the situation confronting him, and his response conforms to his definition of these phenomena. The sociology of knowledge is operative here, helping to define the object in perception so that it can be readily identified. (I might observe at this point that stereotyping is a useful tool to the phenomenologist.)

6. The *earned reputation emphasis* involves observable characteristics such as physical (skin color) and attitudinal (relaxed approach to life, which is interpreted as laziness) differences. Such differences, whether real or imaginary, provoke dislike and hostility between groups.<sup>3</sup>

31 Because none of the above approaches to prejudice taken by itself seems an adequate explanation of this complex problem, and since he sees value in all of them, Allport opts for an eclectic theory of prejudice that draws on all six theories. Each person perceives others according to the social milieu in which he lives, and each situation has a history of economic and cultural tradition. However, from a psychodynamic perspective each individual in this particular society has unique conscious and unconscious mental operations that do not all reflect the aggregate behavior of his group.

It seems, then, that no single theory of prejudice is adequate. I am sympathetic with Allport's summarized position: "By far the best view to take toward this multiplicity of approaches is to admit them all. Each has something to teach us. None possesses a monopoly of insight, nor is any one safe as a solitary guide. We may lay it down as a general law applying to all social phenomena that *multiple causation* is invariably at work and nowhere is the law more clearly applicable than to prejudice."<sup>4</sup>

The discussion so far might seem peripheral to the problem, but this judgment depends on one's way of doing ethics. Obviously, my method offers a view of man to which the social sciences make invaluable contributions. Further, it is notable that none of the preceding theories specifically identifies theology as a determinant of prejudice, although Allport, in the latter part of his book, discusses some correlation between religion and prejudice. He states that religion in this sense pivots on the cultural traditions of a group, and that "religion bears no univocal relationship to prejudice."<sup>5</sup> The kind of prejudice engendered by religion is more in the category of a clash of faiths, or the irreconcilability of absolutes, rather than in the field of racial prejudice.

To raise the moral problem in race relations is to raise the ethical categories of the 'is' and the 'ought' in human relations. The gap between *what is* and *what ought to be* seems to be the motivating force behind the preoccupation of the social sciences with racial problems in the last half century. Such concern by the social sciences in ethnic tensions as a form of social pathology signifies a cry for social health.

Major studies of the race problem have not been content to present the facts: they have generally moved beyond scientific neutrality and affirmed a moral bias as they assert not only what is possible but what is desirable. The thesis of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*<sup>6</sup> is that the dilemma in this country is the clear contradiction between the American creed of equality and freedom and the practical application of that creed to American life. It is the split between precept and practice. The implicit assumption is that the American creed has some positive guidelines to ameliorate racial tensions.

Allport deals with alternative ways of reducing group tensions in the final part of his volume. Clearly, racial harmony is an ideal envisioned by the inquiry of social scientists, and the movement from the real to the ideal raises the question of value. Allport states: "Value enters the scientific situation at two points. First, it motivates the scientist (or the student) to undertake and sustain his investigations. Second, it directs his final efforts to apply his findings in the service of what he considers to be a desirable social policy."<sup>7</sup> So, concern for what ought to be is not the private domain of ethicists and theologians. Social scientists are implicit moralists insofar as they weave into their analyses moral factors which do not emerge from the analyses themselves, but which seem to have existed before the scientific enterprise.

Thus, a theological analysis of race relations may be aided by descriptive factualism in two ways. In the first place, knowledge of empirical data serves as a corrective to simple sentimental "diagnoses and prescriptions." This knowledge also raises the question of the source of moral values and their grounds and goals. At this point, the discipline of Christian ethics becomes pertinent, for it helps to clarify the goals of human interaction. Christian ethics shows that, insofar as man lives and moves and has his being in God, human behavior at its deepest level is not merely a factual problem or a moral problem, but a theological problem.

In this light, racism is not merely the result of a cultural lag (the gap between creed and practice), or the result of inadequate knowledge, or the

result of moral inertia. In the final analysis, the problem of race resides in man's demonic iniquity, in his perverse will, in his worship of the finite rather than the infinite.

#### A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS<sup>8</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist church has no written systematic theology, although one might find the major theological themes briefly dealt with at various places in the literature of the church. From these references a fairly accurate picture of such cardinal doctrines as Creation, the Fall, Judgment, and Redemption could be drawn. Under these categories I shall examine the problem of race.

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1. *Creation and Prejudice.* Paul's discourse with the philosophers on Mars' hill in ancient Athens provided the key to God's creative activity as it relates to the racial question: God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). Two aspects of Paul's statement are crucial for understanding racial life in Creation. On one hand, the entire creation is unified in the *One God*. On the other hand, biological unity is affirmed, for all men are of *one blood*. Certainly there can be no greater argument for racial parity than a common source and content.

We are all aware of biblicistic distortions by "pious" Christians in search of proof-texts to support segregation and white supremacy as the Creator's intent. But the clear consensus of Pauline and Christian theology is the positive affirmation of the doctrine of unity and racial equality in Creation. The Adventist doctrine of Creation should be interpreted to include not only the original Creation at the dawn of time, but also the dynamic activity of God in sustaining and remaking man in his image. So, God has both created and is creating an order of racial unity and equality within racial diversity. Man has corrupted God's created order, but in addition there is a "*given* order of equality-in-diversity," the truth of which has been asserted by our democratic dogma that "all men are created equal." Of course there is variety within this unity, for unity does not mean sameness. Yet, within the vast array of selves and races there is common ground of creatureliness and finitude.

Cultural anthropologists and students of ethnic differences affirm the Christian doctrine of the equality of life in creation: "Most scientists today are agreed that there are not innate biological differences between races to justify an assumption of the superior moral or intellectual capacity by any race over another."<sup>9</sup> Empirical inequalities are acquired, or cultural, differ-

entials rather than biologically inherent qualities. The functional inequalities which we daily encounter are really deviations from a given norm, a matter recognized by social scientists who envision a society based on freedom and equality, although they do not claim to be informed by Christian theology. Christian affirmation of the doctrine of Creation, therefore, stands in judgment against those who would espouse the cause of racism on the basis of racial superiority. To be a racist is to deny the God of Creation.

2. *The Fall and Prejudice.* In the Fall, man not only has lost his innocence but has gained pride. Of the catalogue of sins common to man in this state of estrangement from God, there is none more repugnant to Deity than the sin of pride. In classic Christian thought, pride is the rejection of the "Infinite Source of life" for some finite substitute. In terms of racial prejudice, fallen man makes of himself, or "some collective projection of himself, the center of love and value." Not God, but the self and the race become the object of worship, so that adoration is given the creature rather than the Creator.

Whereas true worship of the Creator who is the universal God tends toward an inclusive 'I-Thou' society, the worship of a finite center of reference, such as the race or nation, creates an exclusive 'I-It' society, and the principle of color or caste becomes dominant. God is dethroned and racial superiority is crowned.

The sin of racial pride, then, is tantamount to idolatry, which is just as repugnant to God when man worships himself in the Adventist church (or in any church) as when ancient Israel worshiped at the shrine of Baal. At this point, the locus of racial sin moves a step beyond the sociological notion of environmentalism to an inner voluntarism. Certainly, external conditioning is not canceled, but the primary focus here is on a perverted will rather than on a bad culture. Here is displayed the will-to-power that sustains racial prejudice as it generates and protects outward forms of discrimination. This will-to-power is what has created the Negro in America, because without the Negro there is really no *white*, sociologically understood. The maintaining of opposites is necessary to the preservation of distinctions. The group image thus bedevils racial relations.

Racial life in the Fall is seen in the myriad instances of paternalism practiced both inside and outside the church. Liberal whites will go to the ghettos of the land to help the wretched prisoners within the walls of poverty, but they will oppose the admission of a black family to their block in the suburbs. A black minister will be invited to a post in a union conference, but will flee from the empty tokenism that he encounters. Racial life in the Fall

is that of self-love and race-love rather than mutual love. Such documented paternalism destroys God's basic order of created community. Sin is at the root of racial pride.

3. *God's Judgment and the Racial Question.* Christians believe that "all men must stand before the judgment bar of God." Since sin, theologically, is at the root of prejudice, and since the Judgment therefore deals with sinners, racists cannot escape the judgment of God. Aspects of this judgment are apparent within the social order today, for God is still sovereign. Man stands accused and troubled at the contradiction between the 'is' and the 'ought,' between precept and practice. Each desperate attempt to justify racial pride, or to cover racial sins with pretensions of morality, is evidence of the "thrashings of a troubled conscience caught on the hook of God's judgment." Clichés that represent that Negroes are "happier with their own people" or "prefer their own churches" are rationalizations designed to justify segregation and soothe moral compunction.

The judgment of God on racial pride might be seen in the recent rise of aggressive black leadership demanding equal rights and equal status. James Foreman's request for five hundred million dollars from the white churches to promote black improvement programs might not be too far fetched, even in the terms of Ellen White, who states, "The American nation owes a debt of love to the colored race, and God has ordained that they should make restitution for the wrong they have done them in the past."<sup>10</sup> The present demand of black leaders within the Adventist church for black union conferences is a case in point.

4. *Grace and Racial Redemption.* Christian theology moves beyond the point of mere diagnosis to prescription, or redemption. Our soteriology envisions the healing of torn racial relations, for God is the God of Creation, Judgment, and Redemption. These aspects of God's activity in the world need not be totally sequential, but might be simultaneous, insofar as redemption is seen in creation, and healing in the midst of suffering.

The redemptive goal in race relations is an open, integrated society in which all men may enjoy freedom and equality, without which there can be no self-fulfillment. The goals of redemption must be similar to those of creation; otherwise we are left with a theological contradiction, since the God of Creation would be in conflict with the God of Redemption. Implicit in a monotheistic belief is the notion of a universal community of mutual respect and mutual love.

On this side of the millennium, Christian ethics may have to use the insights of sociology and the sanctions of public legislation to bring about tol-

erable harmony among recalcitrant racists. However, the “impossible possibility” remains relevant, even as a principle of motivation to achieve higher levels of justice within a society whose redemption is being completed.

#### CONCLUSION

What aspects of Adventist theology seem to engender racism? If Adventist theology is similar to the preceding brief analysis of cardinal aspects of Christian theology, then there is no space in it for the determinants of prejudice. When, then, are the marks of prejudice found in a church whose epistemology is grounded in divine revelation — a church that claims to espouse fundamental canons of orthodoxy?

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In the first place, my foregoing brief analysis of the determinants of prejudice suggests that the causes of prejudice are more psychosocial than theological. Further, the analysis of theology and race supports this position. Critical theologizing brings judgment on racism rather than endorsement of racism.

Racism persists within the Adventist church for the same reasons that it thrives in the Bible Belt and in fundamentalist groups in this country: emphasis on individual salvation and a radical eschatology. Niebuhr says that “hearts changed by mass revivalism remain remarkably unchanged in racial affections.”<sup>11</sup> Revivalism focuses on man’s vertical relation to a God who will take care of all social problems “over there.” Horizontal relationships and interests become proportionately less important as “other world” concentration increases. Sin becomes an individual and private affair between the believer and God, and the corporate aspects of human experience are blurred.

This picture suggests that psychosocial forces engender prejudice in individuals. These individuals generally have a personality structure that feeds on the dynamics of insecurity and exclusiveness. Fundamentalism, with its moralism and emphasis on forgiveness of personal sins, answers the need for security, whereas withdrawal from the world, and preoccupation with the world to come, support the tendency toward exclusiveness. These aspects of fundamentalism do not of themselves engender prejudice, but they are facets of doctrine that the racist finds congenial.

The history of pietistic moralism has always been characterized by ethical carelessness. In fact Rauschenbusch, reacting to Protestant individualism with his ‘social gospel’ at the turn of the present century, set for himself the task of “Christianizing the social order.” He perceived that concern for so-



cial justice is inherent in the theocratic impulses contained in Judaism, is reasserted in Calvinism, and is intrinsic in those faiths that stand in the Calvinistic heritage. Such impulses are intent on bringing "the whole of life under the domain of Christ." These were the ideas behind his *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. The purpose of Christianity, Rauschenbusch believed, is to transform human society into the Kingdom of God by regenerating human relations and reconstructing them in accordance with the will of God.<sup>12</sup>

Although I do not share the optimism of Rauschenbusch in human nature, I do share his interpretation of, or rather his concern for, the social implications of the gospel. Preoccupation with the Absolute and the Transcendent makes moral striving on the plane of history insignificant. Moral insensitivity and a lack of social vigor flow from a perfectionistic ethic that does not see the will of God and the Kingdom of God as relevant to the racial problems in society.

Thus far, the Adventist church has been controlled by social forces. Too often racism infects theology, organizational structure, leadership, financial appropriations, and institutional programs. I concur with Niebuhr that "denominational Christianity, that is, a Christianity which surrenders its leadership to the social forces of national and economic life, offers no hope to the divided world. Lacking an integrating ethic, lacking a universal appeal, it continues to follow the fortunes of the world, gaining petty victories in a war it has long lost. From it the world can expect none of the prophetic guidance it requires in its search for synthesis."<sup>13</sup>

As long as the marks of a racist society continue to appear in the Adventist church, the church's victories will be feeble compared with her calling and potential. Regional conferences, and now the cry for black union conferences, represent the black man's thrust toward equality and freedom within the ecclesiastical structure — which, he thinks, contains truths vital to his destiny. Let us not forget, however, that the need for regional conferences in the church is clear evidence of the victory of social forces over the church, for the dogma that makes regional conferences necessary is anthropological, not theological.

Finally, racial bigots within Adventism will not be converted by hypothetical imperatives that the exclusion of black people from a white church in Alabama will diminish the church's effectiveness in the mission fields. They have a more serious problem in their souls. Literally they must be "born again."

# REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 Paul Ramsey (editor), *Faith and Ethics; the Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper and Brothers 1957), p. 206.
- 2 Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday 1958), p. 203.
- 3 See *The Nature of Prejudice*, chapter 13, in which Allport discusses these theories of prejudice, including his own position.
- 4 Allport, p. 212.
- 5 Allport, pp. 415, 424.
- 6 Karl Gunnar Myrdal (with the assistance of Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose), *An American Dilemma; the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, 20th anniversary edition (New York: Harper and Row 1962).
- 7 Allport, p. 478.
- 8 I have found Niebuhr's position on the question congenial. See Waldo Beach's article in *Faith and Ethics*, pp. 219-224.
- 9 Ramsey, p. 210.
- 10 Ellen G. White, *The Southern Work* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association 1966), p. 54. [This book is a reprint of a publication of Ellen G. White statements, articles, letters, and excerpts from letters written in the years 1891-1899.]
- 11 Ramsey, p. 222.
- 12 Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Harper and Row 1970).
- 13 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company 1929), p. 275.