

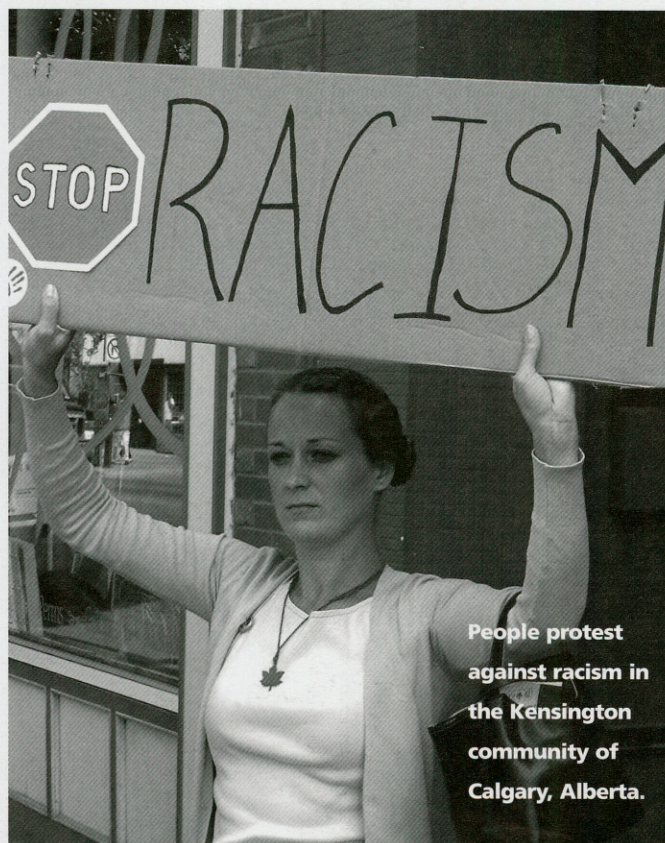
Answering the Call for a Sacred Conversation on Race | BY MAURY JACKSON

Preachers and politicians: this is the undertone to the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Whether the pastor is Rick Warren, John Hagee, or Jeremiah Wright, people are tuning in to how much the present voice of the Christian pulpit influences the future voice of the bully pulpit. Somehow, in all this sound and fury the problem of race relations found a central voice. As a result of the dustup between one of the United Church of Christ's respected clergymen and Senator Barack Obama, one of its respected members, the denomination has called for an ongoing sacred conversation on race.

On May 18, UCC pastors across the nation offered sermons on race as an important first step toward beginning a longer-term "sacred conversation on race" that will take place over the coming weeks and months in our churches and communities. Congregations are now encouraged to develop processes that will lead to productive dialogue and action. It's impossible for a sacred conversation on race to be a single-day event.¹

There have been many conversations on race but too few are designated "sacred." In the spirit of the United Church of Christ's audacious call, this essay seeks to help spark a similar conversation within Adventism. I write as a Christian clergyman whose religious heritage is shaped by the impulse toward justice rooted in both slave religion and the social action of the early Advent movement, as well as the ideas of Critical Race Theory developed in recent years. It is important to acknowledge this impulse. It gives readers permission to challenge my presuppositions as well as their own as we seek solutions to race problems.

This need became clear to me in a church history class I took in my undergraduate studies at La Sierra University



People protest against racism in the Kensington community of Calgary, Alberta.

ROBERT THIVERGE FROM CALGARY, CANADACREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION SHAREALIKE

in the 1990s. Taught by Ronald Graybill, the class was considering issues of race when he told us about a year-end North American Division meeting where pastors and laity lamented that certain conferences of the Church, the regional conferences, were separated from white conferences on the basis of race. At that time, the North American Division president was Charles Bradford, the first African-American elected to the office.

As disapproval for this legacy was expressed, some committee members grew excited about the possibility of finding agreement. Graybill said that a group of white committee members assumed there was unanimous agreement on a solution and they suggested that the regional



A protest against racial discrimination in the 2008 Olympics, at the CNN Center in Beijing, China.

conferences join the other conferences in pursuit of unity. Bradford agreed that the separate conferences were embarrassments to the body of Christ and the mission of the Church. However, he proposed that the white conferences close down and join the regional conferences.

This story illustrates how, even in our attempts to have sacred conversations on race, we must be open to having our presuppositions challenged. Not everyone, even in church life, can have such a conversation.

On the Race Part of the Conversation

As I join the race part of the sacred conversation on race, I acknowledge that black Americans are not the only ones who fall victim to the harms of social injustice. Nonetheless, racial discrimination remains a pressing moral issue for black Americans. I am convinced the “original sin” in the founding of the American Republic was imperial expansion via racial subjugation. As Cornel West puts it:

The contingent origins of American democracy and the ignoble beginnings of imperial America go hand in hand. This dynamic and complex intertwining of racial subjugation and democratic

flourishing, of imperial resistance (against the British) and imperial expansion (against Amerindians)—driven primarily by market forces, to satisfy expanding populations and greedy profiteers—sets the stage for the uneven development of the best and worst of American history.²

The issue of race has been a topic of conversation since the earliest written records, with authors pointing in many different directions to explain the categories we often call “races.” For instance, West believes that the modern concept of race began in 1684 with Francois Bernier, a French physician, who classified races by skin complexion.³ Martin Bernal suggests as the originator David Hume, whose polygenetic view offered during the 1700s suggested supposed genetic differences among races.⁴ However, if race describes the differences in culture and phenotype due to the influence of environment, the beginning may be found in Plato.⁵

These examples show how hypotheses on the nature of human differences through racial taxonomies are fluid. Another particularly noticeable history of racial origins and legislation is found in the Judeo-Christian Holy Scrip-

tures. But before considering the stories of the Generations of Noah and the Tower of Babel recorded in Genesis, let's examine the biology of race. This brings us to the recent discipline of Critical Studies, which questions all attempts to determine racial categories.⁶

In an article titled, "The Social Construction of Race," Ian Haney Lopez writes about the genetic myth of race origins:

There are no genetic characteristics possessed by all Blacks but not by non-Blacks; similarly, there is no gene or cluster of genes common to all Whites but not to non-Whites. One's race is not determined by a single gene or gene cluster... Nor are races marked by important differences in gene frequencies... The data compiled by various scientists demonstrate, contrary to popular opinion, that intra-group differences exceed inter-group differences. This finding refutes the supposition that racial divisions reflect fundamental genetic differences.⁷

This verdict from biological scientific research begs the question: "from whence originated the races, if not from genetic coding?" Haney Lopez continues shattering the myth of race and the attempts to justify the concept based on phenotype:

[T]he notion that humankind can be divided along White, Black, and Yellow lines reveals the social rather than the scientific origin of race.... Along the way, various minds tried to fashion practical human typologies along the following physical axes: skin color, hair texture, facial angle, jaw size, cranial capacity, brain mass, frontal lobe mass, brain surface fissures and convolutions, and even body lice. As one scholar notes, "[t]he nineteenth century was a period of exhaustive and—as it turned out—futile search for criteria to define and describe race differences."⁸

Although I agree with Haney Lopez that race is a social construction, I also find it important to note that its roots go back as far as the Hamite myth of Genesis. In this ancient story, Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and

Japheth, were understood to be the patriarchs of the racial groups from Asian, African, and European peoples. The biblical social construction of race, it can be argued, is based upon the typology that comes from the myth of color.⁹ Once again, Haney Lopez exposes the mythical factor of justifying race based upon skin complexion:

To appreciate the difficulties of constructing races solely by reference to physical characteristics, consider the attempt to define race by skin color. On the basis of white skin, for example, one can define a race that includes most of the peoples of Western Europe. However, this grouping is threatened by the subtle gradations of skin color as one moves south or east, and becomes untenable when the fair-skinned peoples of Northern China and Japan are considered.¹⁰

This statement closes the door to all the traditional indicators that we ordinarily associate with race. None of the three methods—genotype, phenotype, and complexion—are proper measuring criteria for the intractable category that we call "race." This leads Haney Lopez to conclude:

The rejection of race in science is now almost complete. In the end, we should embrace historian Barbara Field's succinct conclusion with respect to the plausibility of biological races: "Anyone who continues to believe in race as a physical attribute of individuals, despite the now commonplace disclaimers of biologists and geneticists, might as well also believe that Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy are real, and that the earth stands still while the sun moves."¹¹

Critical Race Theory was first developed as a discipline by legal scholars, not scientists. Legal scholars, when they sought to address issues of social justice in present-day American society, saw the need to critique the limits of traditional law. Critical Race Theory questions the legal premises (the existence of race being one) that have gained a foothold as "givens" in liberal legal theory. As Richard

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Delgado sees matters, the important themes of Critical Race Theory are “the call for context, critique of liberalism, insistence that racism is ordinary not exceptional, and the notion that civil rights law has been more valuable to whites than to blacks—and others as well.”¹²

This discipline is based on the assumption that culture constructs social reality for the benefit of society’s elite groups, to protect their interests.¹³ Because culture constructs social reality, the ways of being in society are changeable. Certain legal modes that pretend to be fixed and nonmalleable can impede, rather than aid, the search for racial justice.¹⁴ Alan Freeman’s understanding of the motivation behind Critical Race Theory scholarship is that traditional “legal doctrine has evolved to rationalize the irrelevance of results.”¹⁵ This means that justice is defined by fair procedures and not by equitable results. This amounts to justice without beneficence, process without product. If merely fair procedures—and not equitable results—are the aim of social justice, problems arise for despised racial groups seeking a retributive and distributive social justice in fact—not simply justice in theory.

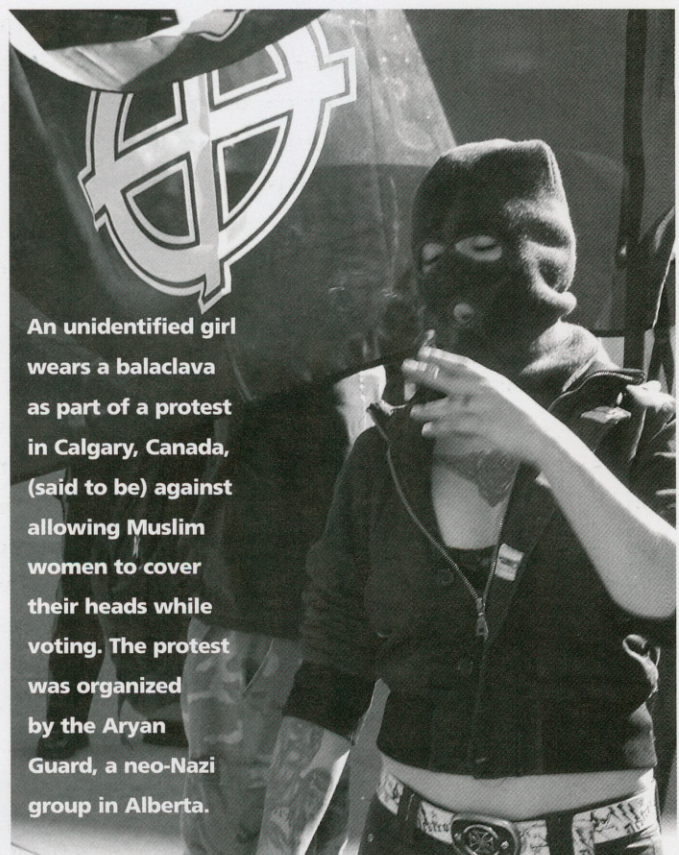
It is problematic that the racialized group referred to by the now-broken/discredited symbol of a “black” race is caught in a quagmire. On the one hand, the discriminated social group has a burden to expose the racial category as a myth of social construction and reject being identified with the despised race. On the other hand, having been disadvantaged by the social injustices caused by being legally encoded in racial terms, the group finds it necessary to embrace the racial identification in order to call for the remedial action of justice that revalues the group through proper recognition and social uplift.

The so-called African-American group has historically been discriminated against in the United States on the basis of race. Now that laws have changed and rules appear more equitable, this group is put in the strange position of seeking justice as a group for discriminatory practices in the past (that have put them at a current disadvantage), while rejecting the group identity predicated upon receiving the racial justice. In principle and for the sake of truth, race as a concept must necessarily be exposed as a (myth of) social construction. This is a necessary condition for the goals of a “color-blind society” to be met. In practice and for the sake of beneficial justice, race as a concept must necessarily be acknowl-

edged as a broken symbol for the only human hope of social remediation.

Herein lies the dilemma for black human equality or black human freedom. Here, too, exists the meeting ground of the conflated options of business as usual and the business of relative justice, which historically have sought the lowest of several ideals.¹⁶ This agenda explores the place where the concept of distributive justice fights to share space with a concept of retributive justice.

Given that critical race theorists challenge the status



An unidentified girl wears a balaclava as part of a protest in Calgary, Canada, (said to be) against allowing Muslim women to cover their heads while voting. The protest was organized by the Aryan Guard, a neo-Nazi group in Alberta.

quo legal doctrinal approaches to shaping social order, what options are available to reform and make positive changes for racial justice? A survey reading of texts on Critical Race Theory leaves one with the impression of a call for radically revising the political resources and energy of society. This revisioning combines the tactic of shame with a revaluation of a despised race.¹⁷ (It is important for the reader to be aware that we are now using the term *race* as a socially constructed category.)

Because the myth of race has been used in the past by one group of people to disenfranchise, discriminate, and dismiss another less powerful group of people, legal doctrines aimed at neutral procedures instead of equitable

results are inadequate to the aims of racial justice in Critical Studies.¹⁸ However, the social construction of race should really not be a surprising notion to biblical students, who immediately think of the statement in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

That text brings us to the sacred part of the conversation.

Sacred Part of the Conversation: Sketches of a Constructive Proposal

Let's now turn to the need for a constructive theological proposal that can help clarify the moral problem of discriminatory practices in race relations. This discussion centers on the model of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman recorded in the Gospels. If race is socially constructed, then what are the implications for a theological anthropology that acknowledges race only as a social construct? What kind of theological anthropology goes along with aspects of our identity being socially constructed?

In order to investigate these questions, it is helpful to discover what a conversation between Critical Race Theory and moral theology might look like. If there is no real difference among what we call "races," then how would a constructive Christian theology view social relations informed by the ordinary theory of race? Is this simply harmless nonsense, or do humanly crafted unjust structures cause harm?

In the past, humans viewed otherness as a threat to cultural annihilation. There was no necessary burden to seek a common unity with otherness. What was needed was a mobilizing cultural force to combat the other, in the name of God, who planned races to be separated by the divine laws of natural ordinance. Although there are tragic cases of genocide in regions around the globe today, the concept of genocide is a modern notion, such that even biblical societies did not view the demands of holy war as genocidal. If God could be theorized as the

author of races, then God had a plan to keep them distinct. The unfortunate reality is that even the Judeo-Christian Holy Scriptures (an authoritative repository of spiritual wisdom) seems to hold to some of these categories of racially instantiated humanity.

Today, it is self-inflicted folly to limit otherness by laws that resist miscegenation, deny education, or be unjustifiably selective with immigration. Nowadays, there is a need to embrace the so-called other as an ally against the common dangers that threaten humankind's existence. In our day, we have the mandate of history to reconceptualize, retheorize, and reevaluate who the God of the despised races really is. We ask instead, who is the God of humanity? The criterion of humanization—taking "human historical existence to be of central importance; as something, therefore, for which humans must take full responsibility"—is rational, and rooted, I believe, in the biblical tradition.¹⁹

According to Richard Rice, the open view of God, a middle position between classical theism and process theism, is a resource that values both divine and human creative freedom by granting that God freely creates the world and that his policy of restraint involves granting humankind genuine creative freedoms.²⁰ This divine gift of freedom allows for human social construction, however, it also implies human responsibility.

For the Christian, the application of a theological anthropology that values creative freedom highlights the "anthropic principles" embedded in our conception of God. Whatever describes those matters of ultimate concern to us, in turn, helps us locate the symbol for God. For the purposes of social justice, Open Theism—that is, the view that God and humanity are in a dynamic, reciprocal relationship—most adequately provides a definite description of God. This freewill theistic view is one that locates ultimate concerns in the human aspirations for beneficence, justice, and freedom. This helps in presenting a theological critique of the current

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The Safe Harbour Youth Ambassador Diversity Program in British Columbia, Canada, teaches youth how to respond effectively to racism and hate, and champions multiculturalism, anti-racism and human rights.

problems of classifying race relations.

Although the biblical record is spotted with less-than-noble ethical norms, unscientific explanations of the universe, and even problematic theological claims, overall the sacred writing provides a comprehensive meeting place sufficient for a Christian moral theologian to frame theological inquiry and moral discussion. A number of biblical passages that address the issue of racial justice provide fruitful exegetical ground for a moral theology on race.

There is the metaphor of humanity made in the image of God found in the Genesis account of creation. There is also Yahweh's moratorium on holy war against the nations in the book of Judges. It is especially interesting to read:

I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died... [T]he Lord had left those nations, not driving them out at once, and had not handed them over to Joshua.... They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their ancestors by Moses. (Judg. 2:21–3:4)

One is led to wonder how race relations were affected

during the time of the Judges and the Monarchy. There is also the biblical motif of Israel, not defined as a race or nation, but as "a people." The religious emotion found in these and other passages calls for new language that gives expression to our notions of a moral theology on race.

In order to exhaust the biblical resource, a person's hermeneutic must be informed by critical scholarship. It is important to recognize that the Bible is a compilation of multiple-layered literary traditions. The biblical record is an anthology of Jewish and Christian literature that spans hundreds of years, uses a variety of literary genres, and evidences the work of multiple editors. It is because the many voices of various communities of a faith tradition are left in place in this rich artistic creation that the Bible is valued as the "meeting place" for theological reflection by Christians.

Furthermore, the biblical writers understand God to be in relationship with humanity. The God of the Bible is fundamentally relational. The biblical record reports God as one who repents in Genesis 6:6, becomes displeased in Genesis 38:10, listens compassionately in Exodus 3:7–9, and possesses a host of other anthropomorphic relational

characteristics. This humanistic picture of God is the vision of reality robust enough to motivate creativity in social action.

The biblical story of Jesus and the Canaanite/Syro-Phoenician woman provides a disturbing possibility as we seek to understand the task involved in defining a social program that revalues a despised race. There are details about this story that suggest the hard labor involved in such a program of revisioning human difference for today. One factor is that both the Matthean and Markean passages preface Jesus' encounter with this woman by having him make a radical break with the legal tradition of Jewish dietary practices (Matt. 15:1–20; Mark 7:1–23).

As with Critical Race Theory today, this move questions whether the supposed legal tradition is nothing more than a cultural statement from an earlier era. Perhaps both the Mosaic codes and the U.S. Constitution should be understood not merely as legal expressions, but (more importantly) as cultural expressions that require reinterpretation and reexpression from time to time.

Another detail of the story is the uncomfortable choice of language Jesus used in conversing with the woman. He begins by suggesting an ethnocentric posture. Matthew reports him saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 5:24). Both Matthew and Mark report him saying, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Matt. 15:26; compare Mark 7:27). Here again, moral theologians must force an honest and candid dialogue that includes disturbing myths and must be ready to hear painful discourse. This discourse will naturally revolve around the different stories of groups of people—those variable human aims at justice, fellowship (beneficence), and completeness (liberty).

The third detail that this story points to is how Jesus revalued this woman of a despised race by addressing the harms from which she sought relief. The story recognizes that justice without beneficence is form without sub-

stance. The woman wanted her demonized daughter to be made whole. In the end, all the talk about difference came down to the common conditions of all humanity—the death-producing conditions and the conditions of searching to understand our strange maladies. This point, the point of human need, is where moral theology must ultimately place its energy.

It might be that a program to repair government-sanctioned harms against a group must supplant a race-based affirmative action program. The language should be centered on the "descendants of the enslaved" in America rather than any racial designation. Maybe university and college admissions programs can discard the language of "underrepresented minority" and replace it with a policy redressing the "laws limiting the education of the slaves," thereby setting back the descendents of the people who were enslaved.

The focus ultimately must be on redressing the harms that were propagated (both legally and culturally) on a group of fellow humanity. By focusing on redressing the harms done—and not on the myth of race—we can revalue a despised race and bring about social justice both distributively and retributively. This I propose as a picture of a responsible moral theology for a pluralistic society. This searches out a language that speaks to the common conditions of human circumstances.

Jesus speaks of the final judgment as a day when all humanity will be evaluated by how they treated God in the person of disadvantage (Matt. 25:31–46). This is in line with Karl Barth's book, the *Humanity of God*.²¹ This theme resonates with Jesus' most embraced self-identifying title: "Son of humanity." So, then, what the human hand (human legal institutions) cannot move can be moved by the human heart (human relational influence). Here is an alternative model for a sacred conversation on race that calls for a reevaluation of the way we frame the moral problem.

The Canaanite woman's encounter with Jesus

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illustrates how his dynamic view of covenant, his magnanimous view of the Kingdom of God, and his creation/redemption perspective of humanity work together to inform an arrangement of the moral principles of justice, beneficence, and liberty. Jesus, in his prophetic role, amended the covenantal relationship of the Jewish people so that it included a covenant of *justice* for the Gentiles. In so doing, Jesus also recognized that the *benefits* of God's Kingdom are to be shared by all in the newly defined moral community. Finally, he acts as the creator and redeemer of this woman's daughter by healing her of the oppression that constrained her *liberty*.

There are no doubt limits to what options are available to us on this moral problem. Yet this discussion helps shift the focus from the mythological issues of race to the real life issues of harm that can be empirically measured and redressed if we have the willpower. What is next? What is needed to turn this conversation into a sacred practice on race? How do we address the problems of separate conferences in the United States and South Africa? How do we confront the new code words that are used to ensure majority control of social groups?

Whatever else can be done, I am certain that this conversation is a good place to start. The key word is *start*. ■

Notes and References

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