

# Celebrating Diversity: Negotiating Difference

## Exploring the Color White

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### Introduction

Celebrating diversity and negotiating difference are neither facile commitments nor easily achieved activities. Celebrating diversity may bring to mind cultural fairs where ethnic foods from a variety of countries are dolled out in bite-size samples while people attired in colorful dress give demonstrates of rituals from their countries of origin. Negotiating difference may bring to mind civil conversations where problematic issues are pondered, discussed, and resolved. Both images belie the underside of such celebrations and conversations if the people in one group are people of color and those in the other group are the color white. The underside in such circumstances is both cultural insensitivity and racism. It is this underside of white insensitivity and racism which must be illuminated if we are not to unconsciously perpetuate the very racism and cultural insensitivity we seek to overcome.

In this essay I am speaking as a white, middle-class, educated, 57-year-old heterosexual male who has reaped the benefits that the dominant culture of privilege bestows or facilitates for persons who "possess" these attributes. Having been reared in a largely homogenous small county-seat town in the Midwest, my first memory of racism occurred when a young white woman who belonged to our church became pregnant with an African American man from a near-by large city. My father, the minister of the church, was asked to perform their marriage. My clear memory is a discussion between my parents with my father saying "race" should not be a factor if the couple were in love and my mother talking about how sorry she felt for the young woman's mother. I remember my father being very clear when he said, "Our culture will one day be more like countries where the races are increasingly blended and 'racial purity' is not a concern to people." At that point, as a child I knew at some level that my father was right: people should not be discriminated against because of their race. It was many more years before I recognized that racism was far more than acts of hatred against people because of their racial or ethnic background. Recognition of the institutional aspects of racism came next, and even later a recognition of the way in which race itself is a social construction, and how my own unconscious racism has contributed to my assumptions about the nature of reality, meaning and truth.

Racism is defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as "the notion that one's own ethnic stock is superior."<sup>1</sup> But racism is more than the attitudes of individuals who deem themselves superior to others. Racism is also "a system that promotes domination of the vulnerable by a privileged group in the economic, social, cultural, and intellectual spheres."<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the term racism will be used to

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<sup>1</sup>*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.*

<sup>2</sup>Fumitaka Matsuoka, *The Color of Faith: Building Community in a Multiracial Society* (Cleveland: United

describe both attitudes and systems that foster domination of the vulnerable by the privileged. Cultural insensitivity is used to describe both conscious and unconscious assumptions that one's culture is superior to that of others or that the culture of another is not valuable.

The evidence of racism in the United States is overwhelming. Well-publicized cases of African American victims in recent years include Rodney G. King's video-taped encounter with Los Angeles police which left him with a "split inner lip, a partially paralyzed face, nine skull fractures, a broken cheek bone, a shattered eye socket, and a broken leg"<sup>3</sup>; James Byrd's death in Texas as he was dragged behind a truck by a group of white men; and the shooting of four black men in a New York subway by Bernhard Goetz, who said he felt threatened. Racism carried out by whites toward other ethnic groups also abounds. For example, in 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was killed by unemployed Detroit auto workers who thought he was Japanese.<sup>4</sup> Since police records document countless other hate crimes motivated by racism one is left pondering how many additional cases are simply not reported.

Committed people of many races and ethnicities have worked for years to eliminate racism in the United States. Historically, the battle has taken many forms: for example, support for the abolition of slavery, opposition to the internment of Asian Americans during World War II, the emergence of the NAACP, the rise of the farm workers movement, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and liberal institutional church agendas calling for inclusive memberships and leadership in all manifestations of church life. Yet in spite of these efforts the Sunday morning worship hour remains one of the most segregated hours in the United States. And, interestingly enough, these institutional manifestations of racism occur in the very institutions where white liberal Christians exercise considerable power and influence. How can this be so? Why does so little change so slowly?

There are, of course, no easy or simple answers to these questions. Clearly, the solutions are yet more difficult, but I would like in this paper to identify two aspects of the problem: 1) denial that problems of race are due to racism and cultural insensitivity both in the wider society and in church, and 2) denial of the cultural of privilege. I offer some tentative steps churches may take to address the issues of racism and cultural insensitivity: 1) recognize the social construction of white privilege, 2) see potential resources within the church for the development of rituals that affirm diversity in the context of community. However, before proceeding further, it will be helpful to establish who we are talking about when we speak of the dominant culture of the privileged.

### **Identifying the Culture of Privilege**

First, we must acknowledge some of us are more privileged than others, and many of us have characteristics, traits, preferences, or abilities which make us insiders in some contexts and outsiders in others. Answering the following questions posed by Peggy McIntosh gives us some insight into what it means to be privileged.

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Church Press, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Houston A. Baker, "Scene . . . Not Heard," 42 in *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising* (New York: Routledge, 1993), ed., Robert Gooding-Williams in "Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian," M. Shawn Copeland, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2 (Spring 2002): 15-29.

<sup>4</sup>M. Shawn Copeland, "Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2 (Spring 2002): 15-29.

- I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my own race most of the time.
- I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
- I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
- I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systematic racism for their own daily physical protection.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people in my racial group.
- I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection of my race.
- I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.<sup>5</sup>

We need to recognize the areas where we are privileged. If we remain complacently unaware of the place we hold in this culture and in our church there is little hope that we will contribute much to a more just and compassionate world. Unless we claim our space and acknowledge the power and influence that goes with privilege, our unconscious or perhaps conscious fear of losing our place will shape our attitudes and motivate our actions. Having claimed our privilege, we must then acknowledge not only the ways in which it has been obtained, but also the ways it is currently maintained.

### **Nationalism as a Reinforcer of Cultural Insensitivity**

Our position of privilege and our conscious or unconscious belief in our superiority is shaped and reinforced by the nationalism and patriotism which pervades life in the United States. There is an implicit assumption by the privileged white class in the United States that the American way is the “best” way, regardless of the custom, habit, issue, or modus vivendi in question. It was not until I had lived in another country for an extended period of time that I came to see the socio-cultural construction of many U.S. institutions, customs, habits, norms, and political views. The unconscious assumption that had shaped my life held that because the United States was wealthy and powerful in the arena of nations its traditions must be superior to those of others. After all, other nations had had their time in the sun and had fallen because of some flaw in their national character or some other inferiority that had removed them from a place of power. Living in Canada, a country which many citizens of the United States think is “just like us,” made me aware that there is more than one way to establish and maintain a democratic way of life.

People in the United States generally are not interested in hearing about the ways other cultures solve problems or deal with common issues. I learned soon after returning to the United States that when I would contribute to a conversation by noting a Canadian practice that worked more efficiently or humanely than a practice in the U.S., most people were simply not interested. At one point, I said: “From my experience in Canada, I know that health care does not function the way it is often presented in the United States. Canadians can select their own physicians, in spite of what U.S. politicians say about the Canadian system.” I saw eyes glaze over, and the conversation often moved on as if I have not made the observation.<sup>6</sup> Why? Because at some level people in the U.S. do not care how others do things. The

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<sup>5</sup>Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997): 294-294.

<sup>6</sup>I am convinced this experience is not unique to me. In conversations with people from other countries, I have frequently heard them make the same observation.

presumption is that others have little if anything to contribute to American know-how.

In addition our republic—viewed as benevolent by the dominant culture—is understood to have allowed all sorts and conditions of people to venture past the torch of the Statue of Liberty in order to give “them” the opportunities to have the same liberties that “we” all have as an inalienable right. Deeply instilled in the story of the dominant culture is the belief that we are a friendly and generous people who have allowed countless people to share our dream. But who is the “our”? And what does the reality of life behind the dream embody for those who live in the United States but were born in other Americas—for example, Americans from South America, or Americans from Latin America, or even Americans from the Northern parts of North America, namely Canadians? And what does it mean to be African American, born in the United States yet, because of the exclusionary practices of the culture of privilege, often prevented from sharing in the rights, freedoms and liberties granted to white people?

We must acknowledge that, as members of the culture of privilege, our myths—that is, the stories which express to some degree our life orientation as groups and individuals<sup>7</sup>—sustain key aspects of our dominant culture’s identity and numb us to other realities. We were taught these stories as children, and we believed them. In some real way they have convinced those of us from the culture of privilege that we truly are good people, open and accepting of others, willing to give others a chance, and expecting that hard work will ultimately result in the good life. And of course we believed those civics classes that told us that the Bill of Rights and the Constitution guaranteed the rights of *all* Americans. The suggestion was never made that the enforcement of the legal code and the administration of justice was in any way dependent on the color of one’s skin or area of town where one lived. The claims for democratic ideals were presented as if they were universal—of course they applied to everyone—and the stories were anyone’s for the asking. Thus, many who share the culture of privilege were taught and continue to believe—in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary—such is the case.

What is some of the evidence to the contrary? Why do we continue to live in denial that such evidence matters?

### **Historical Roots of White Racism**

We need to make ourselves aware of the history of the United States in regard to race relations. The stories and myths and the laws and rights of the dominant culture of privilege never applied to everyone in these United States. The historical roots of the profound patterns of racism that shaped the ethos and culture of the United States of America are acknowledged by most persons in the dominant culture, but their impact on the present structures of society are denied. While on the surface the commitment to a democratic form of government, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and a free economic order appear to protect all members of the society, in actual fact they were designed to protect the wealthy land owners who colonized the eastern seaboard of the United States. For example, in 1828 North Carolina required that a man own 50 acres to vote in a senatorial race. Out of two hundred fifty voters in Wilmington, North Carolina, only forty eight men had the qualifications to vote for a senator.<sup>8</sup> By the time of the American Revolution in 1776, the institution of slavery was well established in the U.S. As an institution, slavery

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<sup>7</sup>Robert H. Ayers, “Religious Discourse and Myth,” *Religious Language and Knowledge*, ed. Ayers and Blackstone (University of Georgia Press, 1972): 76-95.

<sup>8</sup>Thandeka, *Learning To Be White: Money, Race and God in America* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 51.

was one of the most blatant forms of racism in America. As early as 1660 it had become more profitable for Virginia land owners to buy slaves than to pay indentured servants.<sup>9</sup> “Accordingly, in 1660, Dutch ships, now exempted from local tax duties, began to bring more Negroes to the colony.”<sup>10</sup>

And yet the cultural story of the dominant culture tells us that the Civil War was fought to abolish slavery and that, from that point on, all people in America were truly free. African Americans after all were given the same rights and privileges as the dominant culture...the same rights, the same protections...the same privileges ... the same freedoms. Yet how can anyone with even a modicum of awareness believe that? Investigate the history of real estate sales in California and you see that people of color did not have the same privileges. If you believe that African Americans have the same freedoms, ask why “driving while black” can be dangerous in many areas of the United States regardless of whether one is obeying the law. Ask African Americans and other people of color if they experience the United States as the land where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are protected by equal justice for all.

### **A Shocking Awareness of Conflicting Views of Reality**

What happened at the O.J. Simpson trial is a case in point. No event in recent history has so displayed the divide that exists between the experiences of the dominant culture of privilege and the African American experience of life in America as the outcome of the trial.

In the outcome of this trial, we see “diametrically opposed interpretations of the same set of facts”<sup>11</sup> For African Americans, O.J. Simpson functions in significant ways as much as a symbol as an individual.

He is every black man who has been pulled over by a white police officer, beaten to the ground, jailed without evidence, framed for a crime he didn’t commit, or hanged from a tree in the hot Alabama night. Given that legacy, it is difficult for African Americans and other people of color who have been subjected to racially induced experiences of mistreatment not to doubt the police in particular and the intentions of the dominant society in general.<sup>12</sup>

For those in the dominant culture of privilege, O. J. Simpson was guilty of murdering his white wife and the white man at her home at the time of the incident. Scientific evidence in the form of DNA matches left little doubt in the minds of most members of the dominant white culture that O. J. Simpson had been freed in a miscarriage of justice. Yet little attention had been paid by members of the dominant culture to prisoners—often African American men—killed by the electric chair and lethal injection for murders DNA evidence now shows they did not commit. At the present time, the evidence is so overwhelming that people have been put to death for crimes they did not commit that the Republican Governor of Illinois and the Democratic Governor of Georgia have halted the use of the death penalty.

Our understanding of reality is shaped to a considerable extent by our social location: that is, by the positions we hold, the experiences we have had, the emotional needs we seek to fulfill. “An explanation from one position may be valid from that view; another observation from a different angle may have

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<sup>9</sup>Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), pp. 295-315.

<sup>10</sup>Thandeka, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup>Fumitaka Matsuoka, *The Color of Faith: Building Community in a Multiracial Society* (Cleveland: The United Church Press, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>12</sup>Matsuoka, p. 4.

equal validity. The notion that only one view represents the truth is difficult to accept, unless we assume either that one has a monopoly on veracity or, more likely, is powerful enough to impose its point of view on the others, which has often been the case in our racial scene, deepening the interracial division.”<sup>13</sup>

The situation becomes increasingly acute when people with power force their views of reality on others. This overt and covert use of power by those in the culture of privilege has the potential to see people with differing experiences of reality as “the enemy.” In a conflict-ridden world, “evil reveals a strange but persistent anomaly. If we listen to what its inhabitants tell us about their enemies, we are overwhelmed by the ugliness and magnitude of wickedness. If we let these same enemies talk about themselves, however, the ugliness mutates into beauty and the wickedness into innocence; the magnitude remains the same. The clashing perspectives give rise to a glaring incongruity: in a world so manifestly drenched with evil everybody is innocent in their own eyes.”<sup>14</sup> The fact that people generally view themselves as the “good” folks makes one wonder about the origin of cultural insensitivity and racism. As long as the dominant culture uses its overt and covert authority to subordinate those with less power, the demonizing of the other will continue.

Our denial of our place of privilege prevents us from seeing that our stance toward the world is also a point of view that is shaped by our position. From the point of view of the culture of privilege, its views are “reality.” The cultural myths and stories, the symbols of power and authority, the institutions which shape daily life, the visions presented in magazines and on television in both shows and advertising contribute to the notion that the perspective of the culture of privilege is in fact not a perspective at all, but reality itself. By failing to recognize that we are members of the culture of privilege we consciously or unconsciously stand on the backs of those whose primary vocation is as one called to serve.

By understanding how “race” is constructed, taught, and observed both consciously and unconsciously in American culture, one can begin to discover the deeply woven roots of racial attitudes. When one comes to see the place each has been assigned in the socialization process, one may begin to see the implications of this assignment for those who have been assigned to underclass locations. When recognizing this, whites come to see how it is impossible to “upset” racism and cultural insensitivity without facing the discomfort and unsettling anxiety of having to no longer assume that their privileged status comes simply from some innate superiority. It comes at a price for people of color and ultimately for whites themselves. For ultimately the privileged ones who dehumanize others give up a part of their humanity as they inflict suffering on the other.

But how can white people be helped to see that they are the color white and their place and station are not God-given but are socially constructed? People of color living in the United States know they are assigned a particular place. They confront this every day. People of color learn at a very young age they must not only understand the cultural system of their families and cultures of origin, but also, if they are to survive in the world, the rules and assumptions of the those who are the dominant, privileged people. Beyond the borders of family and neighborhood most people of color must know the social rules of the

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<sup>13</sup>Matusoka, p. 22. “Critical race theory holds that people’s perspectives on events are overwhelmingly determined by their racial background. Critical race theorists argue that there are competing racial versions of reality that may never be reconciled. They would argue that because few people in the racially dominant group will ever be able to see things as people of color do, real racial understanding may be beyond the nation’s reach.” Matusoka, p. 48

<sup>14</sup>Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 79.

white, privileged culture if they are to survive. In this way, people of color living in a white culture are at a minimum bi-cultural. In many underclass neighborhoods people of color may be required to know the cultural norms of three or four cultures. For example, Korean merchants living in West Oakland will be expected to know at least the Korean American, African American, and white American cultural norms to survive. Whites, on the other hand, can get by in many areas without ever learning about another culture or ever needing to know another culture to survive. How can we as Christian white people first acknowledge and then convince our white sisters and brothers that they are standing in a place of privilege? One element involves helping them see how much their social location influences their understanding of reality.

### **The Social Construction of the Color White**

Author, educator, and journalist Thandeka challenges whites to play what she calls the race game. The race game has only one rule: use the term *white* whenever you speak of a Euro-American cohort. In her playing of the game, she asks people to do this for one week and then come and talk with her about what it means to live in America.<sup>15</sup> At the point of writing, no white Americans have been able to follow this one seemingly simple rule. She theorizes that this is because following the rule causes white people to question their most profound assumptions about who they are and who the other is. As a result, white people deny through indifference and avoidance confronting the social construction of their own social position.

By not fully acknowledging people of color or recognizing the social construction of the color white, white people are able to assume that their cultural norms, policies, and standards of truth and beauty are “reality.” By failing to acknowledge these differences, whites are able to deny that they are racist (for most whites are not engaged in the blatant crimes), while at the same time distancing the “other” so that there are no serious threats to white privilege...the privilege of setting standards for truth, beauty, conversation, culture, music... reality itself. From the stance of privilege, they can function in daily life without ever having their “reality” questioned. Whites who remain indifferent to their mono-cultural stance and who do not recognize that they are constructed white by the socialization process unconsciously contribute to the indifference which ultimately not only permits but creates the violent acts of racism abhorred even in the legal code.

In the seminary classroom, when white people are asked to consider the culture of anyone who is other the resistance is often subtle. One sees it by a sudden inattentiveness or sense of boredom. In a recent “Disciples History and Polity” class, where we discuss both African American and Canadian Disciples, a white student asked me, “Why should I attempt to learn about another culture? There are so many it would be impossible for me to learn all of them. And if I just learn one, what good would it do me?” Few students in Berkeley are so honest about their resistance. David Augsburger has pointed out that if we know only one culture we know no culture. For, of course, the real threat, which is most often unconscious, is that to learn another culture necessarily will relativize ours. If white people identify themselves as white, they can no longer assume cultural privilege without at some level questioning the assumptions of their privilege. Such questioning creates enormous discomfort and brings a sense of shame to those who gradually recognize at whose expense privilege is maintained.

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<sup>15</sup>Thandeka, *Learning To Be White: Money, Race and God in America* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 3-4.

The situation can be viewed as bleak. Because few people from the dominant culture care to see things from the perspective of people of color, critical race theorists see little hope that this nation can reach any meaningful degree of racial understanding.<sup>16</sup> Separation and isolation between people of color and those of the dominant culture of privilege (American style apartheid) is profound. For example, “despite all of the advances made by the civil rights movement, progress on housing desegregation has been painfully slow. The vast majority of large cities are divided geographically along racial bounds. ‘Out of sight, out of mind’ allows the privileged people to either deny or forget the conditions in the ghetto. Ironically, we expect the poor of color to live like the privileged while at the same time cutting them off from the examples and institutions necessary for them to do so.”<sup>17</sup> As social conservatives blame the victims themselves by accusing them of being lazy, sexually permissive, and welfare-dependent, radical racial essentialists see the problem located in the white establishment with its unspoken commitment to hire and promote whites at the expense of people of color. While both of these solutions seem simplistic and misguided, people in mainline congregations contribute to the despair through their indifference and inaction. As white people of privilege maintain an “out of sight, out of mind” attitude toward the conditions of people of color, the racial divide grows.

The racism of indifference or denial is in one sense more difficult to address than blatant racism. “Especially within a large-scale setting, where the other lives at a distance, indifference can be more deadly than hate. Whereas the fire of hatred flares up in the proximity of the other and then dies down, the cold indifference can be sustained over time, especially in contemporary societies.”<sup>18</sup> Here the economic, political, or cultural “system” is viewed as the oppressor. The white culture, which has created the system over time and which sustains the system through compliance, desensitizes individuals within the society to the suffering that exists to maintain the economic, political, or socio-cultural status of the privileged. “Numbed by the apparent ineluctability of exclusion taking place outside of my will though with my collaboration, I start to view horror and my implication in it as normalcy. I reason: the road from Jerusalem to Jericho will always be littered by people beaten and left half-dead; I can pass—I must *pass*—by each without much concern. The indifference that made the prophecy, takes care also of its fulfillment.”<sup>19</sup>

### Denial in White Churches

In white churches it has been commonly assumed that the way to oppose racism is to affirm that which people share in common. By focusing only or primarily on the aspects of our humanity shared with others, we minimize or deny the importance of our diversity. In the Christian tradition, we have long sought to celebrate what we share in common with others: that is, the deepest sense of who we are as children of God. Using such phrases as “we are all one in Christ,” “at our depths we are all the same,” “around this table we celebrate our common humanity as children of God,” and “beauty is only skin deep,” we perpetuate an attitude which seeks on the one hand to ignore obvious aspects of diversity while on the other silently leaving unchallenged the attitudes and rules of the dominant white culture. White people have been taught that the way to address racism is to deny that there is any significant difference between “us” and “others.” Often it is only through subtle gesture or voice inflection that the air of superiority of well-intended white people toward people of color is manifested.

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<sup>16</sup>Matsuoka, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup>Matsuoka, pp. 66-67.

<sup>18</sup>Volf, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

The rituals that shape our common life in the church celebrate our unity in Christ. For example, as we celebrate the Eucharist we affirm the unity that occurs through the sharing of Christ's broken body and shed blood. That which makes us one is celebrated; the characteristics that reveal our seemingly undeniable diversity are "transcended" for our common life in Christ. People of color are welcome at the Lord's Table in many white liberal congregations, but at a price. They must conform to the worship style and customs of the dominant community as the price of admission. "The recent statement by the pastor of a liberal inner-city congregation sums it up: 'We are a radically inclusive church: everyone who walks through this door is welcome.' Indeed, those who submit to the community (symbolized by walking through a very specific door) and thus promise not to create trouble are always welcome."<sup>20</sup>

The superiority of white skin with its accompanying social rules and cultural norms remains the unspoken "elephant in the room." Here the community is shaped by a focus on love, but it is an understanding of love that seeks to overlook or deny difference rather than a love that seeks to see who we are in our totality. The move to unity involves an overlooking or denial of difference. Should not love see us as we really are by accepting the diverse ways in which we have been created by God? Here a superficial notion of love functions at the expense of difference.

Liberal congregations frequently exude an ethos of white cultural superiority even as they commit themselves to help others. This help carries the implicit assumption that it is to give "others" an opportunity to be like "us." "One large, affluent liberal church in Dallas recently donated twenty computers to an inner-city project. A worship service of celebration to which children from the poor neighborhood were invited focused on the hope that these computers would help them to get ahead, giving *them* a chance to become more like *us*."<sup>21</sup>

What happens as we make this move? The physical evidence of our diverse skin colors, for example, black, white, brown, tan, is overlooked, while the diversity of our cultural traditions is not noticed, or if noticed is ignored. This failure to acknowledge the God-given gifts associated with our diversity by affirming that which we share in common both contributes to and is shaped by a white culture that does not recognize the social construction of its own color.

### **Cultural Insensitivity Within the Church**

Those of us who are in the church have a history of ambiguous and often destructive interactions with other countries and cultures. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, missionaries went to other lands, taking with them not only their faith but the cultural assumptions embedded in their faith traditions. Missionaries sent out by mainline religious denominations generally failed to recognize the mutual interactions that occur between a belief system and the culture in which it resides. While we now regret actions taken by missionaries tantamount in some cases to cultural genocide—for example, with Native Americans—the sense of white cultural superiority lingers.

In religious groups that reflect the growing diversity of the United States, it is not uncommon to find that people of color are seldom asked to share their cultural heritage. As white mainline religious groups

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<sup>20</sup>Joerg Rieger, *God and the Excluded: Visions and Blindspots in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 37.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 38.

have recognized that they “should” be more inclusive, they have often relegated tasks or agendas deemed to be less significant to others. When people of color are invited to share their traditions of worship, members of the dominant culture often treat the customs of others as quaint, simple, or novel without a consideration of the manner in which a cross-cultural conversation about sharing meanings might enrich or even change a custom or norm of the dominant culture.

### Radical Hospitality

There are few institutions within the wider community that have as their mandate radical hospitality, a commitment to justice, and a vision of a community as the household of God. The word hospitality (Latin *hospitium*) means both guest and host. Among its definitions is the notion of being “well-disposed toward strangers” and “having an open and charitable mind; receptive.”<sup>22</sup> “Behind this dual connotation lies the Greek concept *xenos*, a stranger who receives welcome or who welcomes. Hospitality implies mutuality and is characterized by sincere graciousness between strangers.”<sup>23</sup>

The Hebrew Bible speaks of the close relationship between God and the sojourner. Genesis 18: 1-15 tells the story of an encounter between God and Abraham where Abraham welcomes God by bringing water for washing and offers an opportunity for rest. The obligations of a host to the stranger were important matters in the ancient Near Eastern world. In the New Testament, Jesus becomes both the host and the guest. Jesus comes as one who serves (Luke 22: 24-27), washes the feet of his disciples (John 13: 1-17), and breaks bread for the four thousand (Mk. 8: 1-10) and the five thousand (Mk. 6: 30-44). “For Jesus the ‘neighbor’ is coextensive with ‘humanity’ to such an extent that the stranger becomes the neighbor. Any refusal of food, shelter, or help is an indictment that merits condemnation.”<sup>24</sup>

The church, the body of Christ, has the mandate to extend hospitality to all people. Jesus’ radical ethic of inclusion draws in even the enemy. He called on his followers to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecuted them. Such demands were not simply theoretical. They demanded acts that required taking certain risks in the present moment. The host who extends hospitality to the stranger can never be certain if such actions will be received or spurned. Yet in the story hosts are not encouraged to wait until they are certain the strangers are friendly and will not harm them. The stranger reaches out in need (taking a risk) and the host offers hospitality (taking a risk). Both act in the trust and hope that their actions will be received.

The prophetic word for the contemporary cultural context comes from the biblical mandate for social justice. In the arena of human interactions, we are called out each day to the world of strangers. We are required to risk reaching forward to the other not knowing if the stranger will receive our acts of hospitality. Even more surprisingly, we may not be consciously aware of the nature of our own hospitable acts. How often white liberal Christians have reached out to others only to relieve their own guilt and not to truly befriend the other. For example, some large white liberal churches are known for their need to be involved in social outreach; however, they reach out only so long as it is not an inconvenience to those in the position of privilege. “Through charities or false generosity, those of the center may attempt to mentor those they consider less fortunate, still refusing to connect their own ‘having’ with the ‘not having’ of the

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<sup>22</sup>*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.*

<sup>23</sup>Michael Downey, ed. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), s.v. “Hospitality,” by Kevin Godfrey, O.F.M. CONV.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

disenfranchised.”<sup>25</sup> Such reaching out does not embody a concern for the other but only a desire to relieve guilt and be free from obligation, the obligation of hospitality.

Theologian Miroslav Volf contends that to reach out in acts of hospitality to people whose cultures, social norms, social conventions, and ways of life differ from ours, four acts are required: 1) “we step outside of ourselves” for a moment to examine what we consider the truths about others; 2) “we cross a social boundary and move into the world of the other to inhabit it temporarily” in an attempt to hear “how others perceive themselves and how they perceive us”; 3) “we take the other into our world” and let their views stand next to ours in order to see the view from both perspectives; 4) “we repeat the process,” bringing our tentative judgments and conclusions back into the process.<sup>26</sup>

Cultural insensitivity and racism in mainline Christian churches comes in part from indifference and the fear that knowing the other may involve some demand, some obligation for deeper involvement. Although true hospitality begins with a simple act of reaching out, the reaching out must embrace the fullness of the other’s humanity. The encounter with the divine image at the mysterious depths of all created beings occurs when we embrace the other as she or he is rather than as we would have them be. Both the host and the stranger will be transformed by the encounter. Those in the dominant white privileged culture fear at some level that much will be required of them since much has been given to them. Those who are members of the privileged culture need to recognize that mere superficial hospitality is as useful as cheap grace. Within the bonds of Christian community we pray that increasing numbers of people will be willing to risk acts of hospitality.

### **Critiquing Our Morality: Claiming Our Sin**

The church as a community understands that, regardless of our best efforts, we live in a state of brokenness. In spite of our best efforts, we do not possess the vantage point of God. In the Christian church we affirm that we are created both in the image of God and as finite, limited creatures. Through a process of moral and spiritual development, we seek to conform our lives to the life of Christ both within and in our actions in the world. Recognizing both God’s saving act in Christ for those who believe (justification) and the need to continue to grow in conformity to Christ’s claims on us (sanctification), we acknowledge that we are not perfect. While in some mainline churches<sup>27</sup> it is out of fashion to speak of that lack of perfection as sin, there is no doubt the language of sin occupies an important place in the Christian tradition.

Sin has been described in part as a “missing of the mark.” While the characterization of sin as “missing the mark” may seem to some to take the sting out of sin and evil, it does reveal that “sin is not sheer malevolence; rather, sin is a perverted, corrupted seeking of genuine good. Hence sin is not an evil substance but a voluntary defection of humankind from its proper and good order.”<sup>28</sup> In a mainline church

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<sup>25</sup>Miguel A. De La Torre, *Reading the Bible from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 48.

<sup>26</sup>Volf, pp. 251-253. Note that such stepping out in the hope of getting as close to others as one can by putting oneself in the skin of another does not suggest that a common view will necessarily emerge. Letting the perspective of another stand side by side with our perspective will help us free ourselves of our distortions and deceptions about the other. This in itself may be a gift of grace to both parties.

<sup>27</sup>In recent years two students from Pacific School of Religion have reported that their clergy supervisors have asked them not to use the word “sin” in sermons because it “would be upsetting to some members.”

<sup>28</sup>Robert R. Williams, “Sin and Evil,” chapter in *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. By Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985): 194-221.

context, sin is an unwitting acceptance of the dominant culture’s view of reality—treating it as the only reality-- and the indifference of the “out of sight out of mind” stance toward persons of color. No one see himself or herself as racist or even as culturally insensitive. Yet white persons of power in leadership positions frequently ignore the devastating impact such indifference has not only on the church but on the community. Fortunately, in many quarters of the church there is a growing recognition that the church of the future must do better if it is to survive and if it is to contribute to the creation of a world where a truly human community can embrace diversity, negotiate difference and celebrate around a variety of common tables.

As a church integrating people of all colors into its life, we know that we no longer simply stand in judgment on the world while overlooking the log in our own eye. “This church no longer plays the morally superior prophet, merely indicting the world for its racial, sexual, and economic bigotry, but learns to see how it is part of the problem. Here resistance to the greatest challenge of the present is developed, the unconscious perpetuation of structures of exclusion by well-meaning people, starting in the church itself.”<sup>29</sup> When we truly accept that we are broken and we sin, we are able to subject ourselves to self-criticism and open ourselves to the critique of others.

In the church where there is a commitment to engage those outside the culture of privilege, where all are welcome without conforming to that which is already happening, there is hope. “Successful resistance to the structures of exclusion is directly related to whether others are permitted to critique the self-image of those in power, however benevolent it may be.”<sup>30</sup> The open church with a commitment to those outside the culture of privilege has the potential to become a place of safety, a place of dialogue and acceptance, affirming not only our unity in Christ but our diversity in Christ. For we all have been fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Such a church knows that it can never be the perfect church or the perfect community; it also knows that it must always remain open to those who are outside its community. “This church knows that it is on the way, a community in process constantly being opened up to new encounters with both other people and the divine Other.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Discovering New Dimensions of our Open Table**

If, as I have argued above, our rituals, especially those involving the communion table, affirm primarily that which we hold in common—to the exclusion of our differences—they need to be revised. We must come together in celebration of the many different ways in which we have been created and see in these differences the work of a creative God. An emphasis on our unique perspectives, customs, traditions, habits, and understandings all share our approach to Eucharist. One does not have to have visited in many different countries or regions to recognize that the way in which people approach God, both in the hymns and the liturgy, are heavily influenced by the cultural traditions in which such worship is embedded. God clearly accepts worship in a variety of tongues, tunes, and postures.

Yet, in the worship of most mainline churches, when we gather around the table we are called to “that which makes us one.” Theologically, however, there is not a problem with acknowledging our diverse perspectives around the table: we come as people created of flesh and blood. And while the blood may be the same color, clearly the flesh is beautifully diverse. God loves us as we are—finite creatures of skin and

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<sup>29</sup>Rieger, p. 124.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 125.

bone—not as disembodied spirits. As we increasingly affirm the fleshly, material aspects of our bodies and see in them the beauty of divine handiwork, surely the differences between us can be celebrated around the table.

However, the differences are also more than skin deep. They are a part of who we are. Were there no differences, it is unlikely finding unity in Christ would matter nearly so much. As we come with our differences, we truly discover the sacred depths of the God in whose image we are created. In the presence of Christ in bread and wine, in the sacred texts, and in prayer and song we are each reshaped.<sup>32</sup> Now differences are not glossed over or ignored. They are noted because they matter. With our differences, we come into the presence of one another and the Divine Other and see with new eyes, hear with new ears, and extend open hands. In some instances our differences will be loved and celebrated, in other instances they will be tolerated, in others negotiated, and in all respected. Without this respect for others we will not build the community of God and the world will be the poorer for it.

We need to take steps now to create liturgies and rituals where this can occur. Some churches are seriously working on this agenda. For example, at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco the communion rite now includes at the breaking of the bread the following words: “We break this bread for those who journey the way of the Hindus, for those who follow the path of the Buddha, for our sisters and brothers of Islam, and for the Jewish People from whom we come.”<sup>33</sup> This is in keeping with their mission statement printed on the Sunday bulletins: “We believe in one God, known to us in Jesus Christ, also known by different names in different traditions. We seek to transform the world, beginning with ourselves, celebrating the image of God in every person. We are a house of prayer, worship, and service for everyone, welcoming all who seek an inclusive community of love.”<sup>34</sup> While these words do not address racial/ethnic diversity per se, the focus on the world’s religions and those who follow them moves in this direction.

## Conclusion

What is the future for a diverse and pluralistic world? The tragedies of September 11<sup>th</sup> remind us once again that different people can have very diverse views of reality. People of different nations, classes, races, and faiths can hold radically different views of truth. There seems little doubt that as a race human beings do not see eye to eye on the most fundamental issues that define who we are. Our differing social locations seem to vouchsafe a variety of perspectives. We continually face a choice: to remain indifferent or to engage those who are other. Professor Howard Harrod once said to me, “As a sociologist, the evidence leads me to despair. It is because of my faith that I have hope.”

As members of the Christian faith community it seems incumbent upon us to work for a world where a variety of communities can live at least in peaceful coexistence and where a number of people can live in true communion, celebrating their diversities and negotiating their differences. Hopefully, as those who are the color white learn to name that marker of privilege, they will be willing to take their place not above others, but eye to eye and shoulder to shoulder with others, giving thanks to God for the wonderfully diverse way we as a human community have been created.

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<sup>32</sup>Rieger, pp. 192-193.

<sup>33</sup>Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA, Sunday bulletins which contain the order of service for any given day.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.