

The Special Opportunity of Mission in a Multicultural World

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Speaking Theologically About Cultural Diversity

Multiculturalism has become a buzzword for some time in our churches and seminaries. Along with the emergence of this popular topic has come a number of resources and books that address this subject matter. And yet, theological resources that address the heart of the matter of cultural diversity are still few and far between.

So, the question before us is: How do we talk about the diversity of cultures and peoples theologically in a way that will address the future of Christian churches, particularly in the West?

Underlying Assumptions About "Multiculturalism"

I would like to respond to this question from the perspective of an Asian American person who also struggles with this issue. Particularly, I would like to take into consideration the matter of race in understanding the diverse make-up of people in our society today.

- Race is the determinative factor in talking about the multicultural reality of the U.S., particularly here in the American West, because race speaks of the way this society was formed and of a particular dynamic of how we relate with each other, both interpersonally and communally.
- If the mission of the church is to address through the lens of faith the well-being of people as they confront major issues of the day, then race is a major factor, more than a general notion of culture, we need to pay attention to in order to talk about the multicultural reality of our society.

Let us review the current racial make-up of the U.S. society as well as that of the state of California according to Census 2002.

Census 2000

	CA	USA
White persons	59.5%	75.1%
African Americans	6.7%	12.3%

American Indian/ Alaska Natives	1.0%	0.9%
Asians	10.9%	3.6%
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islanders	0.3%	0.1%
Persons reporting some other race	16.8%	5.5%
Persons reporting 2 or more races	4.7%	2.4%
Women	50.2%	50.9%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin	32.4%	12.5%
White persons not of Hispanic/Latino origin	46.7%	69.1%

**While the foreign-born population in the U.S. soared during the 1990s, the percentage of those who were citizens declined in many states across America's heartland and in the South.*

Question: What is the origin of racial pluralism in the U.S.?

Michael Omi and Howard Winant in their influential book, *Racial Formation in the United States* (1986 and 1994), talk about the "great transformation" in the American system of race. This "great transformation" still operates in our society and in our churches within a wide spectrum of views and understandings held by us regarding race:

1. On an extreme end of the spectrum is what Omi and Winant call "racial dictatorship." Historically speaking, this dictatorship stretches from the colonial period until the civil rights movement. Other than during the brief period of reconstruction following the Civil War, people of color faced formidable barriers preventing effective participation in the political sphere, including legally sanctioned segregation, the widespread denial of the vote, and the inability to become naturalized citizens.

The system of racial dictatorship was finally challenged by the civil rights movement that brought the entry of racially underrepresented group members into the political process.

Though not as blatant as before, this "racial dictatorship" still operates in the ideology of the political far right today in the groups such as KKK, neo Nazis, and other radical groups.

2. Omi and Winant do not view the civil rights movement as an unqualified success. Drawing upon the work of Antonio Gramsci*, they describe the post-civil rights era as a period of "racial hegemony."

*(*Gramsci uses the term "hegemony" to describe a system in which the dominant class rules with a combination of coercion and consent, effectively co-opting oppositional political currents.)*

Omi and Winant apply this concept to the American racial order and argue that while certain goals of the civil rights movement were met, the more ambitious goals of economic equality and political power for racial minorities (goals that Winant identifies with the "radical democracy" racial project) were actively resisted.

3. Political conservatives during the 1980s affirmed the principle of racial equality, but reinterpreted it to mean the establishment of "color-blind" policies by government and other

institutions and an emphasis on individual rights. Attempts to combat racism by advantaging members of racial minority groups were attacked as "reverse discrimination."

4. This reaction to the gains of racial minorities continued through the 1980s under the Reagan and Bush administrations. Omi and Winant criticize the "neo-liberal" "tossed salad" project put forward by the Clinton Administration in the 1990s, like racial projects on the right, avoided confronting the continued systems of racial inequality.

5. Omi and Winant remind us that "Without question, there has been significant progress toward racial democracy in the years since 1965, yet it is implausible to believe that racism is a thing of the past. "To assert such a position today requires either that one deny the ubiquitous evidence of everyday life—its continuing segregation, its racially assigned poverty and privilege, its bigotry, fear, and nihilism—or that one engage in wholesale victim-blaming, a procedure that merely updates the racial prejudices of days gone by." (157)

In other words, "old-fashioned racism still exists" today in the form of "victimology," "the essentializing attribution of minority misfortunes tout court to victimization by whites." (See also "Race in American Evangelicalism: A Racial Formation Analysis" by Antony Alumkal, Iliff School of Theology)

What can we learn about race in our society from these observations?

- Race indeed matters in order to address the well-being of people in the U.S. today.
- The way we learned to relate with each other in our society has to do with the way race has been treated in our history.
- The way race has been dealt with in our history is to relate with "different" people in an oppositional way rather than a complementary manner.
- The meaning of this oppositional dynamic we have created in our society is that "difference is perceived as less than." (Katie Cannon)
- This is the reason Benjamin E. Mays proclaimed that "America cannot restore what it has not established."

Alternate Approaches to Racial Diversity in the U.S.

What, then, are the challenges facing our society and thus our churches as we consider the racial diversity of today? The questions that are before us include:

- How can we convert a racist house into a race-specific, non-racist home?
- How do we oppose racism so that the diversity of cultures and peoples will not be treated under the common jargon of "multiculturalism" which could mean anything from the racial hegemonic "color-blindness" to the neo-liberal "victimology"?

Churches, in order to "develop and sustain strategies to work with the diversity of peoples and languages in the modern West" (one of the reasons for this PLTS celebration), need to recognize the insidious nature of racism and oppose it. If there is a significant mission of churches in the modern West, it is this challenge of opposing racism both within our churches and also in our society and to imagine an alternate way of relating with each other without minimizing the significance of race-specific identity of people.

In the words of Omi and Winant, "to oppose racism one must notice race."

...as we watch the videotape of Rodney King being beaten, compare real estate prices in different neighborhoods, select a radio channel to enjoy while we drive to work, size up a potential client,

customer, neighbor, or teacher, stand in line at the unemployment office, or carry out a thousand other normal tasks, we are compelled to think racially, to use the racial categories and meaning systems into which we have been socialized. Despite exhortations both sincere and hypocritical, it is not possible or even desirable to be "color-blind."

Speaking Theologically About Racial Diversity in the Context of Christian Faith Communities

Where do we turn in our conversation, both in churches and seminary classrooms, to talk theologically about race? In other words, how do we notice race and talk theologically about it?

A beginning point is an acknowledgement of the pain of racial pluralism in our society and an understanding of its nature. There is a film made by Japanese movie director Akira Kurosawa in the 1950s called "Rashomon." It is a movie about a murder incident that is viewed and interpreted from various vantage points. Out of this film has come an expression called the "Rashomon syndrome." It means views of reality are shaped by position, experiences, emotions, and needs, with variations in time, place, and situation. An explanation from one position may be valid from that view; another observation from a different angle may have equal validity. The notion that only one view represents the truth is difficult to accept unless one actor has a monopoly on veracity or, more likely, is powerful enough to impose his or her own point of view on others.

This "Rashomon" syndrome applies to our racial scene in the U.S. today. As in the case of the O.J. Simpson trial and other trials that carried race factors, an interpretation that is given to any incident depends on one's racial location and varies according to how a person is formed racially. Theologically speaking, the question is: How can a conversation begin when we fundamentally disagree about our reading of reality? This is the question that rises out of the deepest spiritual pain of racial pluralism today. The racial divide is very deep indeed.

In order to respond to this question, we each must notice the particular racial location in which we find ourselves, both as a person of the racially dominant group and as a person of a racially underrepresented group. The establishment of a meaningful relationship across a racial line cannot be easily accomplished without this prior acknowledgement of one's racial location.

Is Reconciliation Across the Racial Divide Possible?

The acknowledgement of our racial locations is by no means an easy task, particularly if a person is of a dominant racial group. Why? Because the person does not have to think about his/her race day in and day out. Even if a person of the dominant racial group notices the significance of his/her racial location, still such an understanding would not guarantee an acknowledgement of the "Rashomon" syndrome that operates in our interpersonal and inter-communal relationships. A mere acknowledgement of "difference," even if it is understood as a "less-than," would not lead to an inter-racial reconciliation and building of a relationship. The damage that is done to the inter-race relationship in our society by the historical injuries (slavery, exclusion acts, internment of a certain group of U.S. citizens) inflicted upon people of color over centuries runs very deep. Are there any theological insights embedded in the lives of Christian faith communities?

Historically, black churches have produced a wealth of resources and insights into this matter, to think theologically about race. From W.E.B. Du Bois, Sojourner Truth, and, in more recent times, Vincent Harding, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and others, valuable insights have been expressed within African American communities, particularly in churches. Recently, other folks have begun to contribute to the theological talks about race. Miroslav Volf in *Exclusion & Embrace*, Donald Shriver in *Ethics for Enemies*, Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz in *The Art of*

Forgiveness, Cheryl Kirk-Duggan in *Exorcizing Evil* and others have addressed their insights on this subject.

In these works there has emerged one common theme. It is the theme of reconciliation. However, the term "reconciliation" does not carry a conventionally understood notion of two people on opposing ends coming together and making up over their differences and animosities. What emerges in these theological writings is a different and surprising understanding of "reconciliation."

Historically, reconciliation is initiated by those who have been racially oppressed. They are the ones who initiate a gesture of reconciliation to the oppressors, those who, otherwise, really do not deserve to be reconciled. In the words of Rev. Paul Nagano, a Japanese American Baptist pastor who was forced to spend time in an internment camp during World War II despite his U.S. citizenship, "We have been placed in internment camp. Our stories are full of suffering and pain. And yet, I am deeply convinced that we have to go beyond rage, resentment, and fear of those who placed us into such a predicament. We all must live together."

"Is there, in the culture of black Americans, a predisposition, an ingrained gift, for injecting the forgiveness of sins into their political negotiations with us, their white American neighbors?" writes Donald Shriver, Jr.

Such an act is the "redemptive tradition" that is deeply ingrained and continues to be practiced within African American religious life, a Christian willingness to show mercy rather than condemnation. Similar examples can also be found in other underrepresented racial communities. This redemptive tradition is indeed a powerful invitation on the part of a racially underrepresented group to engage in a conversation across the racial divide.

The question before us, particularly for those who are in the historically and racially dominant situation, is this: Are you truly open to become a grateful recipient of this generous and gracious act of reconciliation initiated by those who have been an object of the oppression? This is the challenge facing churches today, particularly churches of racially and culturally dominant positions in today's society.