Understanding Racism to End Its Effects
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1. Race as it relates to this topic is defined as, “a group of people distinguished by genetically transmitted physical characteristics; and/or a group of people united by a common history [culture], nationality, or tradition.”1 When a group of people states that they are willing to participate on a journey with persons both like and unlike themselves, many different unavoidable situations will arise. Whether they are situations concerning race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., these socially placed and accepted demarcations affect the way persons interact with others—especially for African Americans as they journey through the labyrinth we call life in America.
2. Joseph Barnt, in his book, *Dismantling Racism*, defines racism as "prejudice with power." He says racism is only present when a culture or persons within the dominant culture possesses the power to enforce its prejudices. Prejudice is defined as "having opinions without knowing the facts or to hold on to these opinions, even after contrary facts are known."2 “As whites make negative assessments of ‘others,’ they cling to positive images of themselves.”3 Hence, “white individuals usually see themselves as not racist but as good people, even while they think and act in anti-black ways.”4 Most white persons who fit this category will state that they are “liberal” rather than “progressive.” By being liberal, they still work and act out of their racist attitudes, but do so-called “acts of kindness,” while to be progressive, one seeks to move from one (racist) to another state of being (not racist) and to change the systems of oppression. This is the work of liberation and transformation—not only for the oppressed, but also, for the oppressor. Anthony T. Evans in his 1992 book, *Are Blacks Spiritually Inferior to Whites?* defines myths as "traditions passed down over time in story form as means of explaining or justifying events that are either lacking scientific evidence or historical basis..." He suggests, that if a myth is accepted, it influences every area of society's life: education, politics, religion, economics, etc. A myth begins to authenticate and replicate itself without being grounded. There are four ways that the myth of the racism effected Africans and African-Americans.
3. The first major effect of the myth of racism occurred with the enslavement of the African in North America during chattel slavery for over four hundred years. It created a consciousness of Black inferiority. This entire oppressive system of chattel slavery was based on a belief in black inferiority, which became known as the myth of the Hamitic Curse.
4. Throughout history many people perpetrated the myth—from slaveholders to presidents. George Washington, the first U.S. president had slaves. Thomas Jefferson, another U.S. president in 1801 said, "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of body and mind."5 He further stated on another occasion he felt the Negro "lacked native ability for the larger pursuits of civilization..." Another slavery proponent said, "Black people are incapable of self-government... whereas, whites' skill at organization and government are the sovereign tendencies of our race."6 There was a firm conviction that black people were biologically and spiritually different and inferior to whites. I wonder did Jefferson during his lifetime read about the culture and civilizations that were built in Mali, Songhay, Ghana, Egypt and Ethiopia? Therefore, to justify their actions many other “myths” were created, such as the myth of inferiority and superiority.
5. The second effect was to build a platform for the perpetuation of the myth in the American South. It is a place where this type of Hamitic Hypothesis thought pattern was prevalent. As stated before by Evans, “a myth begins to authenticate itself” and this occurred in the daily living of those who were the enslavers. Once a myth takes on a life of its own within any culture or community it can become detrimental to either the community or certain people seen as “the other.” In this case, it is the plight of the African enslaved in the Americas. Slavery and the myth of black inferiority affect us (African-Americans) to this day in the form of racism in this country. It also impacts the collective American psyche by limiting the inhabitant’s ability to reflect true multiculturalism. Some sociologists and social historians contend that the myth is so integrated into our society, it is virtually impossible to remove.7
6. Chattel slavery perpetuated the myth and hypothesis psychologically. After creating a theology of inferiority among the Africans in slavery, the slavers continued to attack their psyche. The perpetuation of the inferiority myth is as much psychological as it is theological, because myths affect the way people think in relation to God and the Bible. This is true in the development of the myth of inferiority, which was forced into the psyche of the slave and often transmitted from one slave to other slaves, developing what some have called a "plantation mentality."8 While this mentality historically and contemporarily has been resisted, it has nevertheless left its mark on Black society.
7. In the infamous Willie Lynch Letter of 1712, he states that he wanted to create a slave “without physical chains but with psychological chains of the mind.” Also, that the slave he would create will be kept under control for at least three hundred years and beyond.9 If this is true, then perhaps the psychological slave was created and perpetuated with poor socio-economic status, poor education opportunities, and untrue written history. The racism and discrimination that is built into the fabric of American society assists in the creation of a psychological slave. Whether this letter is true or not—the effects or symptoms of it can be seen in the lives of African Americans. Therefore, racism is a modern tool of oppression of the dominant society to continue to perpetuate the myths of the Hamitic Curse and Hamitic Hypothesis upon people of African and African-American descent.
8. Thirdly, Black inferiority was inherently reinforced largely through education. As credible scholars of the day rendered findings, they were incorporated into professional journals of science and philosophy. History, as it was taught in the white society, was altered to reinforce the so-called natural superiority of the European race and of western European culture. In this sense, education served the needs of the western European domination institution. What was taught in the academies was also taught at home and has become interwoven into the fabric of American society.10 The educational system taught predominately European history and culture or Eurocentrism. The Eurocentric thought pattern is linear, individual, and all events are separate. There is no togetherness. This information that is taught to African-Americans is contrary to the beliefs of African culture. This type of thought pattern informs African-Americans to help to perpetuate the Myth of the Hamitic Curse and the Hamitic Hypothesis. It depicted Africans as barbarians, evil, lazy, and without faith.
9. People of color must liberate themselves from this model. If an African-American follows this model, then creating a psychological slave has authenticated the Willie Lynch letter. Therefore, reinforcing or making valid myths that have no basis in truth. We must rather revert back to our Africentric ways of thinking. That is to follow an Africentric worldview which is circular, communal, and in which all events are tied together with one another. Following this thought pattern will break the chains of the psychological slavery that Willie Lynch discussed in 1712.
10. Theologically speaking, the Myth of the Hamitic Curse was perpetuated by such biblical passages as, Colossians 3:22 “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God.”11 This was the main portion of scripture that was recited to the African during slavery. The slave’s psyche was so distorted that he or she (Christianized by the missionaries) would not go against anything the slaveholder told them to do because they feared what God would do to them. From the very first ventures into the realm of slavery, traders justified their actions by being convinced that it was an effective means to evangelize and proselytize the so-called pagan black race. The Puritans as well, recognized this benefit of slavery. Associations were formed for this purpose and evangelists and missionaries committed their lives to the conversion of the "black heathen."12 No edification was done.
11. Southern counterparts later replaced the first northern missionaries. Slave owners recognized that Christianity would promote a sense of "spiritual equality." They feared lessons brought by Northern Bible teachers would threaten their position and economic survival, which depended on docile, obedient, hard-working slaves. Specifically, slaveholders feared teachings based on passages such as the Apostle Paul's Letter to the church in Galatia, where he says in Galatians 3:28, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ."13 Therefore, the entire book of Philemon would not be taught to slaves because this would liberate them and make them, the slaves equal to their slaveholders. And Colossians 3:11, “here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all” and the Exodus story were definitely not read. For this reason, slaves needed to remain ignorant and illiterate.14 If they had full access to the teachings of the New Testament their individual and collective consciousness would have been raised, in addition to their consciousness and positions changing to being equal with their white counterparts. Even in a spiritual sense, this was totally unacceptable for whites. The Southern Bible teachers willingly complied with the slaveholder’s demands by not teaching these scriptures because it was economically beneficial for them as well. Therefore, it was a crime if a slave was found trying to learn how to read, found reading, or in possession of books. If it occurred, this trespass was met with lashes from the overseer’s whip.
12. Fourthly, another effect of this racist myth is how the Bible has used chattel slavery. The Bible was used to justify the lynching of African-American males. Some southern biblical teachers justified their actions by using Deuteronomy 21:23, “His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.” Those lynched hung until someone (African-American) got them down, otherwise, the person lynched hung all night. However, they had to reconcile the 1Peter 2:24 scripture, “Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed,” since they called themselves Christians. Many stated Jesus did not hang all night, therefore, he is not cursed. The Bible can be used to either liberate or oppress depending upon what the intentions of an individual are, as seen in the above passages of scripture.
13. Racism creates walls between people of color and those of European descent. Racism is a largely American phenomenon. In Blacks in Antiquity, by Frank M. Snowden, he shares extensive data and research showing the "ancient’s attitudes"15 toward people of color. He established that no "stigma"16 was connected to Black people or people of color. Color-based racism evolved as a product almost singularly indigenous to America. And this color or ethnic-based racism is a problem established by the dominate culture’s construction of the infrastructure of this country and its social institutions. The dominant culture has either the inability to see and understand the oppression it causes through creating a racial divide and/or have an unwillingness to resolve the problem through a sharing or redistribution of wealth and power.
14. So one may ask, “So, how do we end racism?” We must begin with remythologizing past myths, creating a new story in community that will allow for all to be as the American Constitution says, all men [humans] were created equal. There are many especially in the political arenas, who are calling for an end to these socially placed and accepted demarcations. However, it is adapted to accommodate the political nature of the country. Barack Obama in his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, MA contextualized Galatians 3:28 to move forward his agenda and bring all Democrats together on one accord. Mr. Obama stated in his speech a step we can all take to end racism and its effects through creating a new story. He stated,
15. “Yet even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us, the spin masters and negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there’s not a liberal America and conservative America—there’s the United States of America. There’s not a Black America and White America and Latino America and Asian America; there’s the United States of America.”17
16. Therefore, if Obama can uplift us all as one America despite the differences we have, then we as the human race must see each other as the same looking beyond race as the issue in the forefront, but rather are we oppressing one another or uplifting one another as human beings created to be equal.
17. Rev. Damon R. Jones is an Associate Minister serving at Calvary Baptist Church of Chicago, where he has been a Religious Educator for over seven years. Rev. Jones pursuing his Doctorate of Ministry focusing in Christian Education and Urban Ministries at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. He received both his Master of Divinity (2005) and M.A. in Religious Studies (2002) from The Chicago Theological Seminary, his B.S. in Sociology from Illinois State University and A.A.S. from Illinois Central College. Damon has taught as an Adjunct Professor at Trinity Christian College teaching both African American History and Sociology courses.

Endnotes:

1 The American Heritage Dictionary Third Ed. (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc, 1992), p. 679.

2 Joseph R. Barndt, Dismantling Racism, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1991).

3 Elizabeth Bounds, Pamela K. Brubaker, & Mary E. Hobgood. Welfare Policy: Feminist Critiques, Traci C. West “Agenda for Churches: Uprooting a National Policy of Morally Stigmatizing Poor Single Black Moms” (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999), p. 142.

4 Ibid.

5 William Jenkins Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South. Glouster, MA, 1960

6 Ibid.

7 Barndt, Dismantling Racism.

8 Jenkins Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South

9 The Infamous Willie Lynch Letter. Black Express News, Chicago, IL September 1996

10 Anthony T. Evans Are Blacks Spiritually Inferior to Whites? Wenonah, NJ, 1992

11 The Holy Bible King James Version KJV

12 Jenkins, Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South.

13 KJV

14 Ibid.

15 Frank. M. Snowden, Jr. Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970).

16 Ibid.

17 The Chicago Defender Newspaper, Volume XCIX – No. 059. Wednesday, July 28, 2004.

Works Cited

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