

Struggling Against Racism with Realism and Hope

Gayraud S. Wilmore
Atlanta, Georgia

We Christians have a problem and nobody knows exactly how to solve it. The problem is White racism—the often unconscious and unacknowledged assumption about the innate superiority of White over Black that has become institutionalized in a complex web of privileges and proscriptions that has kept us separate and unequal in this country for almost four hundred years.

Frankly, I am very tired of talking about this problem. I have been in it up to my neck since early childhood, growing up, as I did, on the border between two poor North Philadelphia neighborhoods, one Black and the other White. I remember watching the last wave of European immigrants following the First World War move into our section of the city day after day. My friends and I helped teach their children English, but other Americans taught them that the first word they needed to learn as White children was how to say “nigger.”

In a few months their parents had sufficiently established themselves to be able to move to better neighborhoods, better schools, and better jobs, all of which were inaccessible to our parents. So we watched the moving vans take them away happy just as we had watched them brought in full of fear and anxiety, but we Black boys and girls were always left behind.

I remember having to cross enemy territory and fight these new teenaged racists in order to get from my neighborhood to play in nearby Fairmount Park. Then in 1943 I went off to Europe to fight another gang of racists as a private first class in the segregated United States Army. I soldiered in the all Black 92nd Division—10,000 Black infantrymen under the command of White field officers, since we were judged to be too incompetent and untrustworthy under fire to command ourselves.

When I returned from Europe, I finished college and seminary and was ordained a minister of a predominantly White denomination, not because I had become a glutton for punishment, but because—to the puzzlement of some of my Black Baptist and Methodist friends—I had made up my mind to continue the fight against racism at its source—in the belly of the White church in which I had been baptized.

So White racism has impacted my life for as long as I can remember. As I have already said, I really dislike talking about it, and yet I must. I now understand that such talk is inescapable for all of us who believe in Christ, inescapable for all believers, but particularly for Black people! To talk about racism and fight against it with all our might is nothing less than a religious obligation that adheres to our faith, to our baptism as African American Christians.

I.

Whenever we talk about religion and race, we ought to begin by acknowledging that the principal reason almost all of the twenty-one or so million African American church members worship in separate Black congregations today is that our ancestors were first introduced to Christianity in America (though not in Africa!) as a racist and slaveholding religion. There are, of course, other reasons, but that is the principal one.

Black people have, said it best:

For we first met the American Christ on slave ships. We heard his name sung in hymns of praise while we died in our thousands, chained in stinking holds beneath the decks. . . When we leaped from the decks to be seized by sharks saw his name carved on the ship's solid sides. When our women were raped in the cabins they must have noticed the great and holy books on the shelves. Our introduction to this Christ was not propitious.¹

In a new book entitled *The Seeds of Racism in the Soul of America*, published by Pilgrim Press, the A.M.E. historian, Paul R. Griffin, who teaches at Wright State University, argues that American racism did not begin among Southern planters in colonial America, but among pious Puritan divines in New England who, in order to consign Black people to the lowest rank in the hierarchy of human beings, distorted four cardinal doctrines of scholastic Calvinism: creation, predestination, sin, and covenant. As a consequence, the New Canaan of the Puritans, the "City Set on a Hill," was rife with color prejudice and discrimination against the Blacks in its midst.

Almost from their arrival in 1630, Puritans instituted laws and practices designed to ensure that blacks would never be a part of their "holy cities." These constraints, which were forerunners of the "black codes" that would be instituted in the North in the 19th century, were a litany of human degradations shocking to find among supposedly saintly men and women. Blacks were denied unrestricted travel and had to have a pass to move from one place to another after nine o'clock in the evening. They were prevented from living next door to whites and could only own homes that were segregated in nonwhite residential areas. They were banned from owning most types of property, including. . . livestock, such as sheep, swine, and horses. Blacks were excluded from the military; prohibited from serving on juries; denied full citizenship and thus prevented from voting (even though they had to pay taxes); barred from jobs because of their color or else harassed and sometimes beaten by mobs who claimed those jobs belonged to them; and segregated in schools, churches, and even cemeteries.²

Paul Griffin is a good friend and insisted that I should write the Foreword to his book. I did so with great difficulty because nothing has made me feel more uncomfortable about being a Black Presbyterian than his persistence in uncovering the roots of American racism in Puritanism. I will not take time to reiterate the many quotations he cites from John Winthrop, Cotton Mather, Theophilus Eaton, and John Saffin. The only point I will make now is that although we Reformed church leaders have skillfully sought to evade it, Paul Griffin and others have demonstrated that modern-day Congregationalists and Presbyterians are the unfortunate heirs of a congenital and pervasive racism that cannot be attributed solely to economic factors, or to the political expedencies of a brave errand into the wilderness, or to the incivility of crass and greedy Southern planters, but must be laid ultimately on the doorstep of high-flown ideas about the God-given inferiority and degeneracy of Black people in the minds of our pious theological forbears.

What does that say to me as a Black Presbyterian? For one thing, it forces me to assume that to be “Black and Reformed,” to use the title of one of Allan Boesak’s books, requires me to produce the kind of theology that makes anti-racism foundational to any authentic Christian system of belief. It also reminds me that choosing to remain a member of this predominantly White church obliges me to work as hard as I can, without killing myself in the process, to drive the demonic power of racism out of this church which first taught me that the gospel was about more than personal salvation, that it was also about transforming the world.

But how can the church itself be transformed from a racist to an anti-racist community? After fifty years in the ministry, I am embarrassed to admit that I do not have any definitive answer to that question. But I am reasonably sure of two things: first, that contextual obedience to the command to love the neighbor as one’s self is a more acceptable offering to God than any set of strategies, tactics, or techniques we might be carrying around in our race relations tool kit. Most of the time we know better what needs to be done than we can muster the will to do it. Second, I am more and more persuaded that we cannot expect time and history to solve the problem of racism for us.

II.

In a 1997 commencement speech at the University of California, President Clinton made the prediction that “A half century from now, when your own grandchildren are in college, there will be no majority race in America.” But according to demographer Nancy T. Kate, writing in *American Demographics* in December 1997, the President was slightly off target. In actuality, three out of four Americans will still belong to the White race in 2050, *although many will identify themselves as White Hispanics*—i.e., Mexican Americans, Chicanos, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Central and South Americans, and other people of Hispanic origin. Though some of these will have “sepia” skin color and an attenuated cultural identity that will be other than the traditional Euro-American or North Atlantic orientation, most will prefer to identify with the older white majority in terms of social and political status and perhaps, religious affiliation.

Of particular note in the demographic picture is the fact that by 2010 the Hispanic population of the United States will have almost overtaken African Americans as the largest minority group in the nation.³ This could have far reaching implications. For one thing, the Black-White paradigm, which for years has been the major heuristic tool for interpreting American race relations, will have to be revised in order to make room for a new reality. But both opportunities and dangers will result from this turn of affairs. Many, maybe most, non-Hispanic Whites will be more willing to welcome to their churches, intermarry, and share power with “White” Hispanics than with Blacks who were born and bred in this country. And if that indeed should be the case, how much real progress will we have made in removing the remaining obstacles to racial justice and equality across the board?

At mid-century, non-Latino Whites will still be the largest ethnic group, if only in terms of a bare majority of fifty-three percent. The large number of new Asian and Hispanic persons making up the bulk of the remaining population will depend, of course, upon a continuation of disproportionate numbers of Latin American and Asian immigrants receiving citizenship and, as most experts predict, upon these groups

continuing to have higher fertility rates than the old stock of White Americans.

Of course, we are in for some dramatic population shifts in terms of ethnicity. The United States Census Bureau's middle-series projections report that shortly *after* 2050 non-Hispanic Whites—the kind of people who now predominate in the PC(USA)—will find themselves, for the first time, a true minority. No one really knows what a difference that will make, but we cannot assume that true diversity and multiculturalism will be the consequence and will bring an end to the old hegemony of White over Black.

I predict that the Presbyterian Church as we know it will not fade away but will continue to exist through the twenty-first century as a somewhat smaller, but wealthy institution comprising a large majority of economically secure, middle class Americans who are (1) predominantly White, but not necessarily Anglo; (2) Hispanics who can and will pass for White; (3) Asians who will prefer to be identified as Whites rather than “people of color”; and (4) the offspring of mixed sexual unions who either identify themselves and their children as White or as “other.”⁴

Whether there will be any African Americans and Native Americans in this still predominantly “White” church remains to be seen. Much depends upon how we choose to deal with their dwindling presence today.

But in such a situation, “Whiteness,” as has always been the case in the Western hemisphere,⁵ will continue to be the ostensible dividing line in both the church and the society, between the “ins” and the “outs,” between the holders of effective power in the courts of this church, and those who will be relatively marginalized and powerless. All reliable indices point to the possibility that in fifty years a disproportionate number of poor Americans will still be people of color, although there will be a considerable number of poor people of Anglo ancestry as a result of our class-based economic system. The real difference between that time and now is that in the future more “colored people” (non-White Hispanics, Asians, and even an increasing number of African immigrants and middle class African Americans) will find a way of escaping from the opprobrium of “Blackness” or “non-Whiteness” by (1) disengaging themselves from their ancestral cultures; (2) abandoning the struggle for the liberation of oppressed Americans of color and lower economic status; and (3) closing their eyes to the racism and White-skin privilege that will continue to plague both the nation and the church.

III.

It is only realistic to assume, therefore, that although “diversity” and “multiculturalism” are largely replacing the traditionally liberal shibboleths of “integration,” “racial justice,” and “anti-racism,” we are not likely to totally dismantle traditional White racism in the twenty-first century.

The last three General Assemblies lifted the themes of diversity and multiculturalism as the way forward in Christian race relations, but, it seems, mainly in the interest of church growth. Certainly a more diverse and multicultural church should help to increase the number of racial-ethnic minority members in what is now an overwhelmingly White church, and should help to blunt the Anglo-conformism of the Presbyterian mainline. But multiculturalism should not be used as an excuse to diminish efforts for justice and equality between Whites and Blacks both inside and outside the church. Realism about the tenacity of color prejudice and institutional racism will not permit

us to substitute church growth strategies for a more aggressive program to mitigate the kind of racism that manifests itself most prominently in the Black-White polarity of this society.

As far as African Americans are concerned, it is clear that we are not ready to give up the Black church, Black culture, or Black militancy for racial justice. Nor should we. They are still needed in behalf of ourselves and the nation as a whole. We know that the increase in the number of hate groups to more than 470 since 1996,⁶ the brutal murder of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas, and Amadou Diallo by New York City police, means that violence against Black people continues to be just below the deceptively benign surface of White America—the evangelical and Pentecostal revival notwithstanding.

The demographic changes that have occurred in California, Texas, Florida, and New York, portend major shifts in the central cities of many other states. African Americans now find themselves in fierce competition with the newcomers for the next-to-the-last rung of the ladder of success. Protestant churches seem not to have found a way to help relieve these intergroup tensions, partly because White Protestants have been too busy fleeing the areas into which the newcomers move, and because they have no comprehensive strategy for multiculturalism. No event in the 1990s illustrates the complexity and internal contradictions of these intergroup conflicts better than the April 1992 uprising in Los Angeles.⁷

Professor Maulana Karenga, chairman of Black Studies at California State University (Long Beach), comments on the complexity of the Los Angeles riots in terms of alienations between competing Mexican and Central American groups and, in South Central Los Angeles, between African Americans, Latinos, and Koreans. Karenga's larger analysis of the explosive relations between African American and Latino populations provides some instructive insights into the nature of a valid multiculturalism. He shows how futile and immoral it is for White Christians to stand by and watch interethnic strife, hoping that it will have no impact upon the majority community. He favors multiculturalism, but warns against its trivialization:

Certainly, what is proposed here is not a multiculturalism of days devoted to ethnic food and clothing, pro forma mention of diversity on special occasions, or recognition on calendars and workdays of holidays of various ethnicities. "Multiculturalism" here means thought and practice informed by a profound appreciation for diversity, which expresses itself in four fundamental ways. First, serious multiculturalism, of necessity, begins with mutual respect for each people and each culture . . . Second, a substantive multiculturalism requires mutual respect for each people's right and responsibility to speak their own special cultural truth and make their own unique contribution to how this society is *reconceived* and *reconstructed*. . . Third, a real and vital multiculturalism requires mutual commitment to the constant search for common ground in the midst of our diversity. . . Finally, a multiculturalism which both reflects and reinforces the quest for a just and good society unavoidably requires a mutual commitment among the various peoples to a *social ethics of sharing*.⁸

All of these criteria readily translate into Christian social ethical principles

familiar to us: first, the intrinsic value of each human being and every group of people in the sight of God; second, the need for humility, repentance, and (because all of us are sinners saved by grace alone) being always ready to undergo fundamental change or conversion; third, fostering a non-hegemonic relationship among peoples—recognizing that God has provided a common ground for building a just and peaceful society of all the inhabitants of the earth, and finally, affirming that such a society requires that no one person or group has a right to enjoy the good things of this earth while the rest of us are inadequately fed, clothed, housed, and cared for as free and equal children of God. That was Dr. King’s dream and is a large part of the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

IV.

When I was in Italy they told me that every Italian is born with something called “*sistemare*”—I don’t know that term’s exact translation, but it has to do with an obsessive instinct to put things in order, to arrange the natural world according to some standard of elegance, to forever be tidying up one’s immediate living space.

I witnessed *sistemare* in the coastal mountains of Tuscany during the Second World War. Whenever a lull in the fighting came I would see the *paesani* out shoveling dirt and carrying rocks to shore up the terraces where they grew their olives and grapes in the shell shocked, mine strewn earth.

My Italian was pretty good in those days, so I asked one of them why they risked their lives rebuilding terraces with a war going on all around them. He said something like this: “Every winter the ground freezes, thaws—rains come, and winds—maybe there’s even an earthquake, or a war—the soil constantly erodes, the terraces crumble and slide down the mountainside. So every year we have to build them up all over again. For hundreds of years we have done this. It is our life.”

I don’t want to be hopelessly pessimistic, but I believe that the struggle against racism is like that. Racism is America’s original sin. The struggle against it is perennial. That struggle is boring, tiring, frustrating, but that is its nature and it won’t change any time soon. Every year we have to do all over again what we did to combat it last year and many years before. Racism is indigenous to the fallen world, the sinful environment in which we all have to live. It is one of the most stubborn and messiest parts of our living space. That should not so much discourage us as it should clarify for us what our moral obligation is in the best and worst of times. We need to know assuredly that it falls to every generation to work while the bombs are falling, to rebuild the terraces of realism and hope against racism’s perennial and inevitable destructiveness; to tidy up the world of interracial and interethnic relations in obedience to Christ.

Each of us must do his or her part wherever we are. That is what Christ demands of us. That is our Christian *sistemare*, our contextual obedience—to keep on struggling all of our lives against the demonic power of racism with realism and hope.

Notes

¹ Vincent Harding, “Black Power and the American Christ,” in Floyd B. Barbour, ed., *The Black Power Revolt* (Boston: Porter E. Sargent, 1968), 86.

² Paul R. Wright, “Seeds of Racism in the Soul of America,” unpublished MS, 17.

³ Middle estimates of population characteristics by race as early as 2010 project whites at 247 million, blacks—42 million, Hispanic origin—41 million, American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut—2 million, Asian and Pacific Islanders—15 million, for a total population of 101,744,000 non-whites compared with 247,193,000 non-Hispanic whites. Round numbers from the *Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 1997* (Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1997), 7.

⁴ The concept of race used by the Bureau of the Census reflects self-identification by respondents, i.e., the individual's self-perception of his or her racial identity. It does not presume any biological or anthropological definition. In 1990 the "other race" category provided for persons who do not identify with a specific group. "Hispanic origin" is defined as an *ethnicity*, (Mexican-American, Chicano, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Hispanic origin). *Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 1997*, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1997, 9.

⁵ In two important books, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control*, Vol. I (New York: Verso Press, 1994) and *The Invention of the White Race: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*, Vol. II, Theodore Allen shows how Scottish, Irish, and German immigrants were molded into a single inclusive category of "white people" in order that the white elite could discourage rebelliousness and solidarity among working class people of all colors and ensure its social and economic hegemony over the new nation. "This 'key paradox of American history' as Allen calls it," writes Bob Hulteen of *Sojourners*, "—the metamorphosis of servants, tenants, farmers, and merchants into a cohesive group—creates a democracy built on certain race assumptions.

⁶ The latest figures from the Southern Poverty Law Center.

⁷ For the demographic setting of the 1992 riots and how the ethnic profile of the rioters and those attacked differ from the civil rights riots of the 1960s see, Mark Baldassare (ed.) *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

⁸ Maulana Karenga, "Black and Latino Relations: Context, Challenge, and Possibilities," in Ishmael Reed (ed.) *Multi-America: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace* (New York, N.Y.: Viking Penguin, 1997), 196-97.