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Reflections on Cultural Racism: The Theoretical Task of the Black Ethicist

The inescapable conclusion is this: At the bottom of the whole question of the backward cultural development of America, the cultural banality, the cultural decadence, the cultural debasement of the entire American social scene, lies the reality of racism.

— HAROLD CRUSE

Since the publication of *The Kerner Report* on civil disorders, the issue of racism has been dramatized — receiving widespread attention in both public and private sectors — as a moral cancer in the body-politic of white America.¹ The issue is of special relevance to the Black American, especially in light of this pivotal juncture in the Nation's history — the eve of the bicentennial. Of course in the sixties, the civil rights and black power movements were catalytic forces in heightening our awareness to the deleterious character of racial prejudice and its effects upon the American social system. *The Kerner Report* states emphatically that "race prejudice has shaped our history decisively . . . white racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II."²

Perhaps because of a shift in recent years in the political and socio-religious climate, there has been a diminishing concern or failure of perspective to develop *moral commitment* on the part of local churches and white liberals to make the problem of racism a top-priority issue. This failure appears to be complicated by white America's inability to distinguish between two dimensions of the same social problem, namely, an understanding with respect to racism as a phenomenon of history vis-a-vis racism as a continual refrain in American social history.

It is my contention that the former is significantly manifested in voluminous literature on the black experience and has developed more or less — particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries — into a kind of "scientific" ideology.³ This type was used to justify the subordination and control of blacks by a white inhumane system. Winthrop D. Jordan, in his classical work *White Over Black*, speaks cogently of the manner in which reasonable men utilized the normative culture and Christian

¹ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, The Kerner Commission, (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1968).

² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³ David J. Snider, "The Story of Racism in America: An Essay on Sources," in the revised edition of Robert Terry's *For Whites Only* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans Publishing Co., 1973). Dr. Snider's article deals essentially with historical and contemporary sources on the manner in which racism developed into a "scientific" ideology, and its subsequent impact upon the evolution of black-white relations in America.

faith to legitimate their domination and exploitation of black slaves through a racist interpretation of history. The latter type is more recent, reflecting a continuous strand in the American conscience and is influential in the shaping of social policy between blacks and whites. Here it is the basic thesis of this writer that racism is no longer considered a top-priority issue in our institutional life because it is essentially viewed by many as a problem *of* history — with little or no relevance to the moral bankruptcy of values — rather than a recalcitrant anomaly *in* the American socio-cultural system.

Therefore, this paper is an attempt to take a critical look, from a black frame of reference, at the phenomenon of racism in the American cultural system, in light of the theoretical task of the social ethicist. In terms of our reflections, we will restrict ourselves to relevant materials dealing with racial prejudice and attitudes in black-white relations. Although attitudes of prejudice toward other ethnic groups in America may represent a valuable point of departure, the black-white attitude is a paradigmatic model of the syndrome of “prejudice-discrimination-subordination” constellation that threatens the moral basis of our social order.⁴ And for this reason, but not this reason only, we are compelled ethically to reexamine this phenomenon.

I. THE ANATOMY OF CULTURAL RACISM

Theoretically speaking, racism is a very difficult phenomenon to understand apart from its cultural context. It is one of those words that many people use — sometimes defensively and with moral indignation — but cannot define very clearly. The ambiguity in the use of the word is apparently complicated not because of irrational interpretation but a tendency to isolate racial sentiments from the socio-cultural system. Joel Kovel, in his perceptive work *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, points to a correlation between culture and racism. The author defines culture “as a system of shared meanings, an organized structure of symbols, made by men in order to define their world and regulate their mutual relations.”⁵

Perhaps unconscious to some white theologians and Christian ethicists, the phenomenon of racism is not only an anomaly inherent in our value-orientation but also a symbolic and organic product of the American cultural system itself. Commenting on the role of racism in the corruption of American democratic ideals, Kovel argues:

If racism has had a stabilizing effect in our culture and helped sustain its “higher,” elements by binding up the “lower,” . . . then our culture is markedly less virtuous than ideology would have it. Our ideals are nourished by corrupt roots and survive by a continuously sustained act of self-deception.⁶

⁴John C. Brigham and Theodore A. Weissback, eds., *Racial Attitudes in America: Analyses and Findings of Social Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), p. vii.

⁵Joel Kovel, *White Racism: A Psychohistory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 4.

⁶*Ibid.*

Ethically discerned, the synthesis of culture and racism represents what appears to be a logical yet incompatible developmental strand because it distorts the activity of our existence by placing ultimate value upon a contingent reality — namely, race. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of racism is operative as a stabilizing mechanism of the cultural *milieu*, a symbolic product of our institutional life. It requires little imagination to perceive, in the words of Kovel, that the “symbols and fantasies of racism have been themselves generated by the history of race relations and sustained by the rest of an organically related culture.”⁷

Since racism is an anomaly inherent in the American cultural system itself, it cannot be adequately understood apart from the way people actually behave and interact with others. In black-white relations, the very process of interaction — socially, culturally, and religiously — is often inhabited by the visibility of skin color. Here Derrick A. Bell, in his book *Race Racism and American Law*, makes a relevant contribution. Functionally, he defines racism as “any attitude, action or institutional structure which subordinates a person or group because of his or their color.”⁸

Furthermore, the manifestations of racism can take many forms. Analytically, there are two basic categories useful at this point. First, there is *overt* or blatant racism, which may take the form of institutional subordination of the weak by the strong based on a constellation of color symbolisms and other psychosocial factors of white society. Gayraud S. Wilmore, in his article, “The Black Messiah: Revising the Color Symbolism of Western Christology,” tends to reinforce also the importance of “color” in the formulation of attitudes of prejudice by white society against oppressed blacks. Professor Wilmore writes:

White racism has been one of the endemic features of the white societies of the West. Black skin color and calamity have seemed to be inseparable in this civilization. It has been the prototype of all oppression based on ethnic, class, cultural and religious differences.⁹

In addition to *overt* racism — the use of skin color and other psychosocial indicators in human subordination — there is what may be called “velvetized” or *covert* racism. Velvetized racism is less ostentatious, but yet deliberate. An imaginative person can twist the phenomenon of racism to reflect a more elegant subtle image of the in-group with reference to members of the out-group. Victims of “velvetized” or covert racism in the American cultural system are often unconscious of the degree and severity of their hurt. Factors responsible for its development

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 5. It should be emphasized, in my own opinion, that the still waters of racism run deep into the fabric of the American cultural system — breeding a kind of moral and social bankruptcy — which destroys the humanity of whites while inadvertently depreciating the personhood of blacks. For Kovel, one begins the theoretical task by digging into the structure of cultural symbolism — vis-a-vis its historical development — in order to understand the phenomenon of racism. He states: “Racism too changes and reflects in itself the over-all historical progression of our culture,” p. 7.

⁸Derrick A. Bell, Jr., *Race Racism and American Law* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), p. 88.

⁹Gayraud S. Wilmore, “The Black Messiah: Revising the Color Symbolism of Western Christology,” in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, Vol. 2. Fall — 1974, p. 18.

are sometimes deeply rooted in political, economic, socio-religious, and institutional structures which do not use color *per se* as a mechanism of oppression, but instead use other mechanisms more indirectly related to color.¹⁰ In short, the very essence of "velvetized" racism is its capacity to work "under cover," and the effectiveness with which it uses the social system to accomplish a given end or purpose. Having briefly considered the character and anatomy of cultural racism, the writer will now explore a few socio-ethical models to further elucidate our reflection.

II. PARADIGMATIC-RESPONSE AS MORAL IMPERATIVE

The questions raised by the *situation of racism* in white America are difficult and complex. The black social ethicist is compelled to reflect not simply upon the classical question "What ought I to do?" Though given the rational legitimacy of its claim, the ethical question must be formulated in the plural rather than the singular particularly in a society that dehumanizes black life. From my vantage point several questions seem appropriate at this time. Theoretically, what are the viable options, if any, for an oppressed and demoralized people? Epistemologically perceived, how may we know and evaluate qualitative ranges of response to cultural racism? And what are the conditions or circumstances in American society that push individuals and groups into certain types of response? These questions, I believe, demand serious ethical reflection. In black-white relations, racism is both a matter of result and response. In *Racial and Cultural Minorities*, Simpson and Yinger provide us with an interesting paradigmatic model. From the perspective of sociological theory, the authors set forth three basic types of responses of minority groups victimized by racism and cultural demoralization. These fundamental varieties include: (a) Avoidance, (b) Acceptance, and (c) Aggression.¹¹

In terms of this socio-ethical typology, *avoidance* is one mode of response to patterns of racial discrimination and color-prejudice in the larger cultural system. For minority group members the *avoidance-response* can be permanent or temporary, depending on the nature of the individual and the social group. Accordingly, there are many motives that encourage this type of response under the situation of oppression, among these are the desire to preserve self-respect, to escape the need for conformity to the role of an inferior; to gain status, power, and income within the minority group itself.¹² In addition, the motif of *avoidance*, as a paradigmatic-response, to cultural racism, may characteristically reflect a pattern of "radical protest" for the attainment of strategic-pragmatic goals of the black community (the Black Power movement). Because of institutional patterns of racism, the avoidance-

¹⁰ *Op. Cit.*, p. 89.

¹¹ G. E. Simpson and J. M. Yinger, *Racial and Cultural Minorities* (3rd ed., New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 159.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 159.

response may also take the form of total withdrawal and a call for a "separate economy" or "separate nation" as in the case of the Black Muslims.¹³

In majority-minority relations where racial prejudice is evident, there may exist another pattern of social interaction known as *acceptance*. Simpson and Yinger distinguish three primary types of acceptance, i.e., wholehearted, specific, and unconscious.¹⁴ Under the first type of acceptance, a minority group member may fairly wholeheartedly accept an inferior position because of antecedent patterns of race relations, conditioned by a history of legal segregation and social isolation.

The second type of acceptance — as a reactionary response to cultural racism — is the tendency to accept "some specific situation or some phase of a relationship that implies inferiority."¹⁵ There is still a third type of acceptance — perhaps the most complex and difficult to understand — that involves the unconscious adoption of feelings of self-hatred, inferiority, and despair on the part of the victimized. These deeply imbedded feelings of inadequacy may, in turn, produce irrational, contradictory, and self-destructive behavior in the personality of the individual. Feelings of low self-esteem tend to be reinforced when a black minority-group member is rejected or "put down" by the dominant cultural system simply because of the color of his skin. This brings us to the *aggression-response* in our reflections upon cultural racism.

While the former types of response to cultural racism have theoretical importance, the black social ethicist recognizes that the mode of *aggression* is perhaps the most viable legitimate response to the immoral subordination of black life by white society. Theoretically, aggression may be defined as a pattern of action directed toward controlling an individual, or possessions of one or more others against their will, which may result in injury or discomfort on the part of those controlled.¹⁶ In the context of black-white relations, the element of aggression may be expressed as a "desire to strike back," to attack the source of one's frustration and alienation.

Ethically considered, the *aggression-response* may be viewed essentially as a tool of reflection to reveal cultural racism for what it is: a moral cancer that disintegrates society from within. Barry N. Schwartz and Robert Disch, in their volume *White Racism Its History, Pathology and Practice*, remind us of the luxury and high cost of cultural racism to both societal and individual norms. The authors emphatically assert:

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160. See also C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

¹⁴ *Op. Cit.*, p. 172.

¹⁵ *Op. Cit.*, p. 172.

¹⁶ Henry P. Fairchild, ed., *Dictionary of Sociology* (Totowa, New York: Littlefield and Adams, Co., 1966), p. 7. For a comparative sociological perspective, see Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (3rd ed., New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 194. While there is theoretical limitation inherent in every typology in terms of its applicability to the black-white dilemma, I do think, however, that such a model has explanatory relevance as one attempts to illuminate the socio-ethical task. As responsive mechanisms, Prof. Merton recognizes that the modes of "aggression" or "rebellion" vary from person to person and from group to group, depending on circumstances.

... in acting out racist attitudes, (white society) has driven itself into a moral desert, populated only by the distortions and pathology which are the products of what racism has made of the racist. The price paid by white society for giving license to racist attitudes and actions takes many forms, ranging from the psychological disintegration of the individual to the hard fact that racism actually lowers the standard of living of whites.¹⁷

For the black social ethicist therefore, the motif of *aggression* becomes a functional mechanism in moving against latent and manifest elements of cultural racism in white America. To be sure, it is more than just a theoretical tool but a moral imperative! At the gut level of life, the black man as moral agent is acutely aware that the notion of aggression is perhaps the only normative-response to the situation of racism because it refuses to accept the social status of inferiority as the black man's birth right. For the oppressed black community, aggression as a paradigmatic response, is not simply appropriate it is an ethical imperative if we are to have freedom and live with dignity and self-respect. It is an ethical imperative in the sense that it seeks to destroy anything that enslaves and dehumanizes black life. In short, it is a state of consciousness which defines the existing American socio-cultural system to be morally corrupt and dysfunctional for people of color and demands radical social reconstruction and attitudinal change, especially on the part of whites. I believe that it is precisely at this point where the ethical task begins, if cultural racism is to be eliminated from our society.

III. COMBATING RACISM: THE ETHICAL TASK

The overarching task is nothing less than to bring the corpus of ethical reflection to bear upon the reality of cultural racism and to discover functional values which have the moral impetus to eradicate all forms of racial prejudice and institutional oppression. The ethical task is complex yet impels the discernment of a new consciousness in America; it means a kind of dialectical movement from manipulation on the part of the oppressed to maturity, from a state of social alienation brought on by racist practices to institutional empowerment, which can only be achieved through struggle and an unrelenting sense of corporate responsibility in black life. The black man as moral-agent is called especially from the revolutionary posture of the Christian faith, to sensitize the American conscience that without power one can neither combat cultural racism nor achieve authentic personhood. Ethically, without power to participate in the decision-making process one cannot be fully human.¹⁸

Therefore, the task of the social ethicist, in the broadest sense, is both *deontological* and *teleological*. On the one hand, the black man as moral agent is obligated to reflect upon the realization of the self through creative activity. Like all men, he is endowed with certain innate po-

¹⁷ Barry N. Schwartz and Robert Disch, *White Racism Its History, Pathology and Practice* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970), p. 2.

¹⁸ Enoch H. Oglesby, "Ethical and Educational Implications of Black Theology in America," in *Religious Education*, July-August 1974, p. 410.

tentialities which can be developed through persistent effort. On the other hand, the radical thrust of the individual toward the *telos* of his own being is frustrated by racism. To be sure, the self can neither engage in creative activity nor discover its true purpose in American society until racism is abolished. Here the primary ethical task, as I see it, is to unmask the pretensions of men who dominate and control the white power structure, in light of the powerlessness of the oppressed black man who still remains essentially a victim of injustice, of social exclusivism and economic subordination in the American cultural system.

In the discourse of moral reflection upon cultural racism, the theoretical task is an important one. Implicit in the task is the attempt to struggle with the pertinent question, What must be done? In responding to the question it would be highly presumptuous on the part of this writer to suggest any easy or final solution to the problem of cultural racism. What seems relatively certain is captured in this prophetic line from the black leader James Weldon Johnson who once remarked: "The race question involves the saving of black America's body and white America's soul."¹⁹

Concretely, I believe the theoretical-ethical task may express itself at perhaps three essential levels or stages: (a) the interpretative self-reflection stage, (b) aggressive self-resistance, and (c) the post-critical level. At the interpretative self-reflection level, there is the need to recognize generic man not only as being made in the image of God (*Imago Dei*), but man as *homo ethicus*,²⁰ i.e., the person in community is also a valuing creature with moral judgment, one who has been called by God to struggle against racism at all levels of life in modern society. The racist's claim to superiority — whether culturally, theologically or psychobiologically considered — has been proven by scientific data to be morally abhorrent and sociologically absurd. Yet the tragedy of racism is the fact that it lingers on as a malignancy interwoven into the fabric of the American cultural system. Why? From a black frame of reference, evidence suggests that racism is more than merely a cultural problem; it is also a theological one.²¹

In *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*, Professor George D. Kelsey argues that the modern phenomenon of racism has evolved into a faith system, producing cultural alienation and the exploitation of the black man by virtue of its stratification of human beings into two fundamental sociological categories: the in-group and the out-group. In elaborating the thesis that racism has evolved into an idolatrous faith system, Professor Kelsey asserts:

¹⁹ Cited in Schwartz and Disch, *White Racism Its History, Pathology and Practice*, pp. 1-2.

²⁰ Richard L. Means, *The Ethical Imperative* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970), p. 10. Prof. Means provides the reader with a perceptive analysis — especially from the vantage point of the social sciences — of the crisis in American values generated in part by a radical dualism between our professed normative aims (*homo ethicus*) on the one hand; and the actual quality of our social practice, on the other.

²¹ Waldo Beach, "A Theological Analysis of Race Relations," in *Faith and Ethics*, Paul Ramsey, ed. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), pp. 219-222.

... the basic racist affirmation of superiority, on the one hand, and inferiority, on the other is not an empirical generalization as commonly supposed. Rather it is an affirmation concerning the fundamental nature of human beings. It is a declaration of faith that is neither supported nor weakened by any objective body of facts. Racism is an expression of the will to believe. The fundamental racist affirmation is that the in-race is glorious and pure as to its being and out-races are defective and depraved as to their being.²²

The theoretical task for the black social ethicist deliberately appropriates the manner in which human relations between blacks and whites become distorted. What we have in the racist affirmation, according to Kelsey, is both the cultural idiom that produces human alienation as well as an idolatrous faith which elevates the "race" to an ultimate level of value. The result is the moral negation of God as the ground of being.²³ Thus the peculiar irony, though tragic consequence, of racism as a faith system is precisely this: that the race is the center of meaning and value; all other questions either in the political-economic or the religious-cultural spheres are secondary in nature.

The second level of reflection, in an attempt to discern the ethical task, is what may be called the *aggressive self-resistance* stage. Here the black ethicist moves from the posture of existential interpretation and analysis, which usually entails an objective evaluation of theological and historical data, to active resistance against the evils of cultural racism itself. The assumption undergirding this level of reflection differs from the previous in that *aggressive self-resistance* becomes the normative criterion or disposition in the sense that one is morally obligated to rebel against anything that subordinates human life — making freedom and the principle of equality a mockery before the gods of power and privilege.

The black man as moral agent recognizes that serious ethical reflection involves more than struggle to eliminate cultural racism but also a kind of liberation for creative self-expression and moral autonomy for the poor and dispossessed. In this sense the ethical task requires one to accent the principle of "liberation" as a distinct possibility for the oppressed in history rather than love as an absolute regulative norm, which has been characteristically the posture of traditional christian ethics for human conduct. John M. Swomley, in his perceptive work *Liberation Ethics*, accents this crucial point in the following manner:

Liberation ethics accents freedom more than it does love because any love of the oppressed which does not result in efforts to achieve their liberation is hypocrisy. It accents freedom because only free persons can participate genuinely in community.²⁴

The third possibility of reflection upon the ethical task in combating cultural racism evolves from what may be called the *post-critical* stage. For the ethically sensitive person in American society, the issue racism

²² George D. Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 24.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁴ John M. Swomley, *Liberation Ethics* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1972), pp. 18-19.

must also engender "reflection after-the-fact," i.e., it incorporates a mode of existential contemplation after the "fact" of critical interpretation and analysis, of active participation and involvement as a resister to the dehumanization generated by the onslaught of racial prejudice. At any rate, this level of reflection encompasses what Henry David Aiken calls the *post-ethical*,²⁵ which faces the question of why one should be morally committed in the struggle against racism. To be sure, self-corrective analysis and introspection are important ingredients for the sensitive and concerned person in the delineation of the ethical task.

In summary, perhaps two observations, at this time, seem appropriate. First, the difficult task of combating cultural racism in white America cannot be adequately achieved apart from the larger issues of justice for poor and authentic freedom for the oppressed, which really involves the redistribution of power for those who have been historically excluded from meaningful participation in society. Secondly, the black man as moral agent must acknowledge that racism itself, as I see it, is not innate in human personality but culturally and institutionally acquired. Thus any rational-moral basis for eschatological hope must come at the level of commitment to institutional and cultural change.

In the final analysis, we must also acknowledge that racism is primarily a "white problem" and not a black problem. Because of the effects however of white institutional policies upon the life of the black community, the black man as moral-agent is intricately involved in terms of the possibility of combating cultural racism. Beyond these reflections, any ultimate solutions must lie in the ability of white America to perceive the necessity for socio-cultural and normative change. Ethically discerned, if white society does not become progressively self-critical of its own cultural system, the possibility for combating racism seems at best remote.

²⁵ Cited in Paul K. Deats, "The Quest for a Social Ethic," *Toward A Discipline of Social Ethics*, Paul Deats, ed (Boston: Boston University Press, 1972), p. 35. In terms of the author's conceptual framework, the other three levels of ethical discourse — as proposed by Henry David Aiken — include (a) "the expressive or unreflective, (b) moral rules, or 'What ought I to do?' and (c) ethical principles, or reflections on how rules can be justified. . . . *Ibid.*, p. 35.

