J. Bernard Kynes, Sr.*

Race and Personhood

Introduction

This essay is in honor of the legacy and memory of Thomas Jefferson Pugh, the father of African-American Pastoral Care and Counseling. This writer, one of his students in 1986-1987, experienced him as a person comfortable with himself as well as with students in my particular classes. Although never speaking directly to him about my own unresolved issues related to racism, I do remember stating, in our group-therapy class, that I carried a briefcase to prove my importance to whites. He simply replied, "Why do you need to do that?" Because of his training and commitment to the worth and dignity of persons rooted deeply in his religious faith and in his dynamic interpersonalist philosophical convictions, he always challenged us to ground our identities in something deeper than racial myths.

This work will explore various aspects of race and racism as multi-dimensional, having a detrimental effect on personhood of all who live in the United States. The meanings of personhood and racism and the impact that racism has on the development of personhood will be initially examined. Next, the thoughts on racism of selected African-American authors will be introduced: Cornel West, Archie Smith, Elaine Pinderhughes, Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Riggins R. Earl, Jr., and Edward P. Wimberly. Some of their themes are racism as a contemporary ideology, the phenomenon of double consciousness,

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spiritual impoverishment, skin color and pigmentation, strategies for transcending racism, and sexuality. Finally, the writer explores the implications of these foregoing ideas for pastoral counseling with particular emphasis on the prophetic role and the priestly function. The latter function relates to ministry addressing the personal needs and issues of people including marriage, family, and small-group concerns. The prophetic functions relate to ministry in socio-cultural-economic-political dimensions.

Definitions

In defining the term "person" or "personhood," several categories are used by philosophers, theologians, and psychologists as well as other social scientists. To refer to someone as a person means emphasizing that the individual or groups of individuals is not a mere "thing" or "object," but rather a subject or self.[1] There are at least three alternative uses of this concept.

First, the term refers to the dramatic sense of the self in which a person is a "part" or "role." The oldest etymological usage of the term *person* is thought to have been derived from the Latin *persona*, "a theatrical term that referred either to the mask worn by an actor who assumed a particular part or to the actor. . ."[2] In psychological terms, *persona* is often used to mean an individual who has unconsciously adopted a psychological mask by which attitudes meet a particular image or facade. "It represents one's projected image in and defense against

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[1]C. S. Evans, "Person" (Philosophical Issues), in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 888.

[2]Ibid.

the external world." [3]

Secondly, the term has legal implications. That is to say, a person with legal entities stands before the law as a potential bearer of both rights and obligations. [4]

Thirdly, the term *person* refers to the moral aspect of the individual. [5] This means that individuals and their groups are entitled to respect and are bearers of moral rights and privileges. It is this third definition that shapes the ideas in this paper. The understanding of personhood presented here is related to the perception that humans are worth consideration and respect.

Actualizing personhood relates to the ability of persons to act responsibly and freely, to self-consciously develop the capacity to learn and grow, and to interact morally and responsibly with others in various types of situations. Can these ideals, however, be actualized given the countless difficulties, institutions, and practices encountered by persons each day in a country rooted in racial strife? More specifically, can the factors of skin color and race influence the actualization of personhood of African Americans?

Thomas J. Pugh was vitally concerned how race impacted personhood. Because of this, Pugh espoused that persons were to be treated with dignity and respect. Furthermore, he believed that individuals should never be considered mere "objects" or "cases" to be manipulated by the scientific expert. Rather, persons should be responded to as moral and responsible participants in the process of growing spiritually and emotionally. His teaching and approach to persons of African-American heritage represented efforts to overcome barriers that race erected in the

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[3]I. R. Sternlicht, "Persona," *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, 893.

[4]Evans, *Dictionary of Pastoral Care*, 888.

[5]Ibid.

lives of people, feeling that valuing persons by treating them with respect and dignity helped to bolster their personhood.

The question is not whether race has an impact on the development of personhood, but rather, how does race influence human development? The answer to the question of "how" relates to the reality of racism and its impact.

Racism

"Racism" is not easily defined. "Racism as a scheme of oppressive social classification based on physical features, mainly skin pigmentation, suggests that its roots are in the biological realm where classifications based upon physical distinctiveness can be made."[6] Historically, African Americans were defined as persons who had a "quantum of Negro blood." Therefore, if any person were born with this amount, that person was considered a Negro. Racism, then, is viewed as an oppressive system of ideas rooted in skin pigmentation where black is deemed inferior to white. The result of such a belief system on those who are portrayed as inferior is to devalue and dehumanize them. Moreover, a social sanctioning system is effected where those who are called inferior are treated as inferior. Stereotypes are formed to legitimate the racial superior/inferior belief system and to hold it in place. Social institutions and political power structures operate on these beliefs; therefore, they reinforce racial stereotypes.

Because racism is rooted in stereotypes and permeates all life, it is an ideology. A well-known example of this is seen in Hitler's Nazi Germany. Furthermore, in the Western societies, the ideological function became normative in the political system, thus directly affecting the legislation of public policy. As ideology, racism functions as an official position by which people

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[6]W. Pannell, "Racism," *Dictionary of Pastoral Care*, 1035.

and their governments arrange their societies and policies to further their self-image and vested interests. When combined with their religion, the ideology of white supremacy becomes a powerful civil religion in which God or the gods are said to be the source and protector of such a system.[7]

Given the context of white racism in the U.S. and its accompanying ideology, the impact on the personhood of African Americans has been overwhelming. They have become mere "objects" rather than "subjects" valued as human beings to be respected and related to with dignity.

The ideology of racism within a powerful political system with vested interests as normative, racists values has a tremendous influence upon the attitudes and behavior of others. As such, "racism can be defined in terms of the attitudes and actions of persons or institutions towards others based upon color or ethnic origin with a view to depriving them of access to the rights and privileges of those holding this view."[8] The issue here is one of power. In order for this ideology to work successfully, the individuals must "manipulate the image-building apparatus of a society. 'Reality' must be carefully managed by those in power."[9]

When managed successfully by those who have political, economic, and educational leverage over those who are not permitted to participate on equal terms, the effect on one's personhood is devastating. Based on history, there is lasting damage. Moreover, the moral consequences of implementing a racist ideology are also severe; racism detracts from the quality of life.

Hence, in this paper, personhood is rooted in a moral,

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[7]Ibid., 1036.
[8]Ibid.
[9]Ibid.

ethical context. An individual or group of individuals are worthwhile and are to be related to with respect and dignity. They should be viewed as having the capacity to act responsibly, freely, and self-consciously in any situation, given the opportunities to participate fully in society and culture. The influence of racism, however, has detrimental effects on the lives of those persons who are not able to fully and freely participate as are those who perpetrate this ideology.

African-American Authors Reflect on Racism

The negative impact of racism is examined by a variety of African-American writers. Racism remains operative in our society today, and racists continue to manipulate society's images to maintain an ideology which grants privileges and position to some while others are denied. As a result, the personhood of African Americans is adversely affected, and racism contributes to the moral decay of our society. "The paradox of race in America is that our common destiny is more pronounced and imperiled precisely when our divisions are deeper."[10]

That racism affects everyone exposed is a theme developed by Cornel West. He refers to the Los Angeles upheaval surrounding the Rodney King saga. This situation is a visible portrayal of the ongoing division in our society with respect to the deep-seated emotions surrounding race-relation problems. West further notes that there is "no escape from our interracial interdependence, yet the enforced racial hierarchy dooms us as a nation to collective paranoia and hysteria—the unmasking of any democratic order."[11]

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[10]Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 4.
[11]Ibid.

What West seems to be suggesting is that no matter how hard we try to deny that we, in essence, need one another, our inability to transcend deep-seated feelings and thoughts over the race issue is eating the foundation of a successful democracy.

One of West's major themes is the overwhelming psychological effects that this division is having on African Americans in particular, although it influences the nation in general. "It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America."[12] A central idea here is a great psychological deficit operative in the lives of many African Americans due to the impact of racism today. Despite this inadequacy, there is an insatiable hunger by African Americans to be treated with dignity, respect, and self-worth.

An additional problem with racism has been identified as a dialectical tension in the lives of African Americans:

> While Black Americans have remained marginal to this society [on the one hand], yet on the other hand, they are not entirely outside of it. Therefore, Black people in America can not solve their own problems of [racial] oppression without helping to transform the very society that enslaved them and has kept them at a disadvantage.[13]

Archie Smith focuses on this dialectical tension, referring to a relevant statement by W. E. B. DuBois. He comments on what DuBois called "doublemindedness": "Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties and double social classes,

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[12]Ibid., 12-13.

[13]See Archie Smith, Jr., "The Relational Self in the Black Church," in *Changing Views of the Human Condition*, ed. Paul W. Pruyser (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987).

must give rise to double words and ideas, and tempt the mind to pretense or revolt hypocrisy or radicalism."[14]

The doublemindedness tension, on the one hand, seems to be the inner struggle to maintain a deep sense of self-worth, identity, and value in a society whose ideology considers African Americans less that human and unworthy of respect. On the other hand, this doublemindedness seems to suggest that African Americans are expected to live up to the images, ideals, and ideological principles which the dominant culture portrays as normative.

Given this doublemindedness, African Americans are challenged in two ways. They need to explore creative procedures to transmute the sting of "the internal effects of white racism and white power, while at the same time seeking the transformation of the systems that exploits them."[15] The internal effects contribute to the self-loathing, pathological depression and related self-destructive behavior being manifested in our community by young African Americans of both genders.

Yet, this problem is not only a social one, but psychological and spiritual as well. According to West:

> . . . a pervasive spiritual impoverishment grows. The collapse of meaning in life—the eclipse of hope and family neighborhood bonds—leads to social deracination and cultural denudement of urban [rural, too] dwellers, especially children.
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> We have created rootless, dangling people with little links to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose of the spiritual communities that in the past helped African Americans face de-

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[14]Ibid., 143.
[15]Ibid.

spair, disease, and death and that transmit through genera-
tions dignity and decency, excellence and elegance.[16]

A central spiritual theme to which West points is the loss
of hope. Without this, the formation of personhood is hindered;
and the development of the responsible, morally free self-con-
scious self is hampered. Developing into a self-valuing person
becomes an insurmountable hurdle when all that one remem-
bers from the earliest moments of self-awareness is a deep feel-
ing of despair, hopelessness, and shame.

In addition to loss of hope, another theme related to the
impact of racism on personhood is skin color. This is explored
by Elaine Pinderhughes. For her, skin color is a primary factor in
interpersonal relating, in intrapsychic dynamics and internaliza-
tion of oneself and others, and in identity formation and
personhood. Skin color is a determining factor in how one re-
lates within a particular African-American Community, as well
as how one is treated by the dominate culture. In summary, skin
color permeates every aspect of the lives of African Americans.

Skin color affects how oneself is perceived and how one
enters into relationship with others. Pinderhughes articulates this
point by describing how white Americans and people of color
view themselves. White people can maintain their ignorance
about the meaning of race both personally and systemically.

Ask a white person his or her race and you may get
the response 'Italian,' 'Jewish,' 'Irish,' 'English' . . .white
people do not see themselves as white . . . while Blacks,
Puerto Ricans, and other racial minorities are forced by
racial oppression to be aware of themselves as members of
racial groups, whites are generally not aware of their white-

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[16]West, *Race Matters*, 5.

ness.[17]

On the one hand, she seems to suggest that white Americans can attempt to live with a color-blind consciousness—theirs—while others do not exist. On the other hand, African Americans and other persons of color have absolutely no choice in the matter. Not only does the color motif impact socially, but psychologically as well.

Others also examine the impact of skin color on personhood. As a family-systems therapist, Nancy Boyd-Franklin points out that the color motif also impacts racial identity. This is experienced internally. When one comes face to face with discrimination based on the conscious and unconscious attitudes of others, that person is encountering the pangs of a race-conscious society and may raise questions about identity, sense of self-worth, and personhood.

She posits that racial identity is an internal process by which one has to deal with silent voices of shame and self-loathing. Again, this has a direct impact on how one feels about oneself and the method through which persons relate to themselves and others.[18]

Moreover, during a study to determine scientifically how Black children evaluated the color black, it was discovered that these children feel less positive about the color black and black people.[19] The study is not the only evidence of this pervasive attitude, deeply embedded into the unconsciousness of a people with respect to race and personhood.[20] There is additional evi-

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[17]Elaine Pinderhughes, *Understanding Race, Ethnicity and Power* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 71.

[18]Nancy Boyd-Franklin, *Black Families in Therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 1989), 25.

[19]Ibid., 31.

[20]Ibid.

dence.

From a theological perspective, Riggins R. Earl, Jr. addresses the way slaves reinterpreted the racial dimensions of skin color. He uses slave narratives to address this concern. Accordingly, the slaves engaged in critical thinking to "demythologize" the negative values place on black skin. However, he comments first on the pejorative influence of racism on the thinking of some African-American slaves.

There is evidence that African Americans struggled with the question of whether blackness in their bodies was the creation of the devil. Possibly the mythic question was: Why did God create whites to reinforce the notion of inferiority in those of African descent? A reported story from African Americans who lived far from white people's teaching and influence is very revealing. They believed that God was the Creator of the white race. These blacks thought that, according to the recorder, the black body was the handiwork of Satan.[21]

This quotation drives home the point that there is no escaping in the hearts and minds of African Americans the negative racial legacy—socially, psychologically, philosophically, and theologically. This being the case, the question is: "How have African Americans survived?" There were many African-American slaves who used their theological and spiritual understanding to reframe the debilitating myths built on skin color.

Earl describes African-American slaves' ability to survive by raising critical theological questions about skin color. They did this by reflecting on the white community's "flagrant

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[21]Riggins R. Earl, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and the Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 51.

disregard for the natural sacredness of [black] bodies." This critique is important because most slaves did not buy into the notion that God had "de-souled" them, and the existence of the color of their skin was the corroborating evidence.

Theologically, slaves survived because they believed that Satan was a "colossal failure as a creator." According to Earl, slaves believed that Satan tried to create human beings but failed. Satan then tried to breathe the breath of life into a dead man, but the dead man remained dead. According to the slave, it was the status of the dead man that provoked God to act: "But the Lo'd he feel sorry for the dead man dat he gin him bref an a soul same as he did de white man."[22] In Earl's mind this is the key in understanding what African-American slaves believed about being made in the image of God.

It is clear that the capacity to engage in critical analysis, resulted in a theological understanding that valued God's creation of the black-skinned people as a result of "the mercy of God." Earl posits that "despite all of the attempts of the satanic forces of slavery to make them into that which was less than human, only God was recognized as having the power to make the black body sacred."[23]

It points to the heart and mind of a people who, on some deep level, believed in the transcendent power of God. They relied on themselves despite the satanic force of slavery. This enabled them to survive psychologically!

Pinderhughes also addresses the issue of skin color from a psychological perspective and its impact on whites as well as African Americans. She argues that to understand the intrapsychic impact of color, one needs to examine the early developmental experiences centered on race and color. Moreover, she

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[22]Ibid.
[23]Ibid.

believes that the investigation must critically explore the methods used to teach both groups how to cope with racial issues and feelings regarding to skin color.

In order to work seriously through the unresolved issues of race and personhood involving skin color, Pinderhughes describes the action that needs to occur, enhancing collective healing and redemption of the self. For whites, the work requires breaking through the denial, projection, rationalization, and other defenses that have maintained the stereotypes and then enduring the resulting anxiety and psychological pain. For people of color, it also means enduring the pain and anger which an exploration of racial dynamics inevitably mobilizes.[24]

The validity of this recommendation is that it offers a beginning for the process of acceptance, healing, and redemption. The endorsement contributes to developing people's capacity to critically explore issues and problems hindering the development of personhood.

While Pinderhughes' recommendation is clear, caution needs to be taken, however. The apprehension is real that people do harbor conscious and unconscious "ideas, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions that hold on tenaciously. Such ideas and attitudes have remained hidden or obscure despite the fact that they heavily determine people's behavior in cross-racial situations."[25] What keeps these ideas hidden but influential has been explored by Cornel West and Edward P. Wimberly.

West points to the issue of "black sexuality":

Americans are obsessed with sex and fearful of Black sexuality. The obsession has to do with a search for stimulation and meaning in a fast-pace, market driven culture;

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[24]Pinderhughes, *Understanding Race*, 73.
[25]West, *Race Matters*, 83.

the fear is rooted in visceral feelings about black bodies fueled by sexual myths of black women and men . . . Everyone knows it is virtually impossible to talk candidly about race without talking about sex.[26]

The obsession with sex and sexuality around the race and personhood is explosive. It is, however,

. . . crucial for Black Americans because much of black self-hatred and self-contempt have to do with refusal of many black Americans to love their own black bodies— especially their black noses, hips, and hair.[27]

West identifies a major cultural factor in the 1960s that helped to foster racial stereotypes about sex. During this decade, myths about black sexuality intensified and black bodies were admired with white bodies.[28] White America's disgust of black sexuality (both women and men) remains operative. The recent tension in Wedowee, Randolph County, Alabama, where the principal threatened to cancel the high school prom if there were interracial dating, serves as one example of the microscopic anxiety and fear about African-American sexuality which is pervasive in our society. "Victorian morality and racist perception die hard."

The community's anxiety and fear about black sexuality is represented by the principal's threat through intimidation (castration) to cancel the prom if interracial dating occurred. The principal's generation is one whose philosophical thinking represents the ideology of the Victorian era, believing in the repres-

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[26]Ibid.
[27]Ibid., 85.
[28]Ibid., 84.

sion of sexual expression on the one hand; and yet, on the other hand, the ideology that deems black bodies are of the "devil."

Edward Wimberly further illumines this point:

> The white man's fear of the black man's so-called 'sexual superiority' is the factor that drives him to keep black men in bondage. The reaction of African-American men to this effort has been a long tradition of 'the macho man' and 'tough guy' attitudes that many African-American males have adopted to cover their vulnerability. The problem is that this is a reaction to a false identity, and this reaction is complicating African-American male and female relationships a great deal.[29]

The anxiety and fear regarding black sexuality are debilitating in terms of fostering positive and constructive forms of interpersonal relating. Moreover, the public's active participation in the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings and now the trial of O.J. Simpson (with respect to the sexuality motif, not the moral dimensions) are examples of this current generation's attempt to struggle with the issues of black sexuality.

West puts forth another significant assessment of black sexuality and race relations:

> White fear of black sexuality is a basic ingredient of white racism. And for whites to admit this deep fear even as they try to instill and sustain fear in blacks is to acknowledge a weakness—a weakness that goes down to the bone. . . . Black sexuality is a taboo subject in America principally because it is a form of black power over which whites

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[29]Edward P. Wimberly, "African American Spirituality and Sexuality," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 4 (Summer 1994): 27.

have little control—yet its visible manifestations evoke the most visceral of white responses, be it one of seductive obsession or downright disgust.[30]

In summary, black sexuality is yet another dimension which contributes to the emotional and spiritual development of the self and personhood of African Americans. The race factor, influenced by historical and philosophical ideologies is often obscured due to the fact that it is a taboo subject. West comments:

> As long as black sexuality remains a taboo subject, we cannot acknowledge, examine, or engage these tragic psychocultural facts of American life. . . . Although the dynamics of black male sexuality differ from those of black female sexuality, new stylistic options of self-image and resistance can be forged only when black women and men do so together. . . .Only by living against the grain can we keep alive the possibility that the visceral feelings about black bodies fed by racist myths and promoted by market-driven quests for stimulation do not forever render us obsessed with sexuality and fearful of each other's humanity.[31]

Implications for Pastoral Counseling

In this essay, the writer has drawn on various scholars to explore issues concerning the subject of race and personhood. The working definition for race is broad and cannot be defined without giving some attention to the complex category of "rac-

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[30]West, *Race Matters,* 86-87.
[31]Ibid., 90-91.

ism." Historically, race has been defined biologically based on one's physical features and skin pigmentation.

Pinderhughes confirms that originally, race referred to biological origin and physical appearance. However, as time progressed, race acquired a social meaning. As a result, stereotyping and status assignments in a given society's system began to promote categories of superior and inferior individuals and groups of individuals based on skin color or blood association.

Given the social ideological influence, human beings have become entrapped by the images and symbols that portray one group being superior over another. Beliefs about inferiority and superiority have created a schizophrenic dichotomy in the fabric of our society. Differing ethnic and racial groups are generally split over how to relate authentically to each other.

With respect to race and personhood, this schizophrenic dichotomy has created an atmosphere of delusion which leads to deceiving ourselves into thinking that we cannot relate meaningfully with each other, across ethnic lines as well as within them. This anxiety and fear is tremendously overwhelming; we perceive each other as "mere objects," inhuman rather than persons created in the image of God, worthy of each other's respect. Within the African-American Community there is a persuasive ambivalence, disappointment, self-loathing, depression, hopelessness, and helplessness regarding self and others because of race. Black on Black crime, especially violent crimes such as senseless murder, assaults, spouse abuse, sexual abuse, and child abuse is beyond reason.

Not only must the discipline of pastoral care and counseling remain priestly in its specific art of caring, but the discipline and its practitioners must become more prophetic in functioning as moral change agents. Pastoral care and counseling practitioners must provide care to individuals, but also they must

expand their specialized skills to empower and liberate the masses by being intentional about teaching and training the laity of the church to become competent care providers as well.

Moreover, pastoral care and counseling practitioners must, without fear, actively participate in defining public policy by becoming advocates for those who are suffering and enduring technological and economic changes, affecting their lives emotionally and spiritually. In this market-driven economy, persons without technological and interpersonal skills will find themselves at severe disadvantages.

Conclusion

The discipline of pastoral care and counseling attempts to reconcile the psychological and spiritual dimensions of one's personhood. As continuous changes occur in our society, the ministry of pastoral care and counseling will play a significant role in the lives of African Americans whose sense of personhood is affected not only by race but by a market-driven and technological society as well.

The discipline of pastoral care and counseling must develop and establish counseling centers in communities where there is a need for pastoral psychotherapy. The persons whose personhood are most affected by issues of race psychologically, are those marginalized by our economy. Therefore, pastoral care and counseling must find prophetic ways to transform the lives of African Americans so that the deep-seated self-loathing, sense of despair, and hopelessness can be replaced with hope and worthfulness.