

Unmasking the Face of Racism

By Ed Rodman

THIS GENERAL CONVENTION marks the 12th consecutive year since the Episcopal Church by resolution indicated its intention of “making this a church without racism.” As a consultant to the several committees overseeing the implementation of anti-racism training, I believe I have a unique perspective from which to make some observations on the task of unmasking racism on the four levels on which it occurs — the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural. I commend reading the report of Executive Council’s Committee on Anti-Racism in the *Blue Book* (pp. 59–62). To place my remarks in context it will be useful to quote a portion of the conclusion of that document:

“Our work has assumed enhanced significance because of September 11, 2001 and the developing internal and external situation. There is an increased emphasis on internal security and proactive military action. Pre-existing prejudices, stereotypes and bigotry based on race, religion and national identity have been exacerbated by this reality. Racial profiling, abuse of police powers, abridgment of human rights and resorting to rhetoric rather than reason make the work of anti-racism increasingly difficult. A principal reason for oppressive systems is the combination of ignorance and fear of the ‘Other.’ This in turn is compounded by the primary obstacle to overcoming racism: unearned white skin privilege. This last year has been (sic) a tendency to revert to classic nationalism, both at home and abroad, which has been inherently racist and detrimental to the welfare of the ‘two-thirds world.’ The ‘Other’ has borne the consequences of decisions which advantaged the few at the expense of the many. The question ‘why do they hate us?’ masks the deeper fear of these historic inequities. Asking such questions may help those who wish to understand the implications of racism in its broadest terms. They gain a clearer understanding of what must be given up by those who have reaped the benefits of these inequities. This is

the place where true anti-racism work begins and ends” (p. 61).

Recent events underscore the urgency of these observations and form the basis for some general comments on the four levels of awareness which form the matrix for understanding the complex nature of racism in contemporary American society. It is indeed the lack of awareness of these realities that is the heart of the problem, and the primary obstacle to — in the words of the title of the anti-racism program — “seeing the face of God in each other.”

The four levels of awareness

1. Individual Level: The bottom line is — What are you willing to give up to end racism? This is not so much a question of material goods and status but of spiritual commitment and authentic Christian identity. It involves white people owning their privilege, acknowledging their fears and breaking through their slavery to their perceived advantage of dominance. It involves people of color acknowledging their internalized oppression, overcoming their fears of backlash and scapegoating (not unrealistic in light of the belligerent foreign policy of Bush and the draconian intentions of Ashcroft), and not settling for individual security at the cost of the continued oppression and marginalization of their brothers and sisters. And it means that all people have to find ways to talk to each other, discover common ground and envision together the “beloved community.” It means each of us acknowledging our complicity and being willing to confront the biblical admonition of the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:7. Nathan challenged David, “You are the Man!”; and we are likewise called to own up to our sinfulness. The oft-quoted protestation that one is “color-blind” — and is therefore beyond prejudices based on race and color — disrespects the uniqueness of each person’s physical appearance and ignores the unconscious reality of racial preference, the significance of group identity and the historical DNA that color has imprinted on the social fabric of this society. It is in fact the material from which the mask is made.

2. Interpersonal Level: This is where the dialogue begins and ends — working through painful memories, overcoming denial, finding one's voice in the face of the other and learning to hear and heed that which must be learned so that we can, in fact, love ourselves in order to love one another. This is neither easy nor quick, but is a fundamental step that, if not undertaken, will doom subsequent action to failure because the group colludes to exclude others rather than committing to genuine inclusivity. The primary point of the training is to prevent this failure. This means acknowledging that racism is not a black-and-white issue but affects all of us. Seeing racism as a black/white issue is a convenient cop-out — a sophisticated form of denial that permits individuals and groups to believe that “we have gotten over this” and we are no longer in the grips of a tragic history of oppression and benefiting from the fruits thereof. This is the strap that holds the mask of racism on our faces, keeping us from exposing our common humanity and acknowledging the pain that racism has inflicted on people of color and the false pride that has captured the imagination of the unwary white person. This is also the point at which the mask must crack if we are to move through discussions of the social construct of race and address the questions of power (and, by extension, who defines reality) that provides the hidden foundation of institutional racism.

3. Institutional Level: Walter Dennis, the late bishop and lawyer, was fond of observing that “the social policies and practices of the Episcopal Church mirror Supreme Court decisions.” He was revealing that ECUSA is a microcosm of the larger picture in this country where the principal argument is stuck on the efficacy of affirmative action for the elite rather than reparation and restoration for the disadvantaged. This is the manifestation of the residual and unconscious captivity of the church and nation to the fundamental notion of white supremacy and Euro-American superiority. The fact that the Anglican Communion worldwide has become predominantly made up of people of color has little effect on the awareness of the American church, because in its heart of hearts, it — like the United States — still believes that it has the power and that it is morally right to presume to dictate the destiny of others. Society must acknowledge the obvious institutional inequities that permeate our major social systems: criminal justice, education, social welfare, employment, housing and health care. In each instance the statistics are clear, the gaps are widening, and the simple and fundamental question of access to these essential services, or equal treatment within them, is still a matter of debate rather than action. This, in turn, exacerbates tensions between and among people of color and between them and other targeted persons who find themselves similarly oppressed, such as women, gays and non-Christians. The interlocking nature of oppression is a major part of the institutionalization of racism because people of color can, in fact, be the targets of multiple oppressions. It is

also manifested in the unwillingness of the society to give up racial and ethnic categories, denying individual identity for those of mixed race and ethnicity. This reality makes a joke of the uncracked mask of racism which suggests that we have gotten beyond this problem. This is the place where that mask must be shattered and our individual identities as children of God confirmed and acknowledged, within a new vision of a “beloved community” where people are truly judged by the “content of their character and not the color of their skin.”

4. Cultural Level: Racism is at its most insidious when it is unconscious and invisible. The cultural norms, practices and assumptions that make up this country's current cultural awareness are the result of a convenient amnesia that permits it to believe that history has no relevance, that every problem is capable of a quick fix and that, if push comes to shove, we have the power to define reality to the benefit of the current majority. It was Booker T. Washington who observed that “if you keep a man in the gutter long enough you will eventually get down there with him.” The banality, dumbing-down, sexual exploitation, homophobia and rise in anti-Semitism (remembering that Arabs are Semites as well) which marks the bread-and-circus entertainment machine diverts us from unmasking racism and its consequences. While we may dehumanize the Islamic world, substitute terrorism for communism, and proclaim a 21st-century Manifest Destiny for the world, our levels of consumption and disregard for human suffering and environmental degradation will be judged harshly and painfully by history. When confronted with the painful reality of our divisions, the promise that is America — “liberty and justice for all” — and the theological assertion of our equality — “we are all children of God” — is the material of the mask that must be vaporized if racism is to be totally exposed, acknowledged and overcome. This is the task that gives relevance to our vision of a church without racism, and the failure to undertake it renders our work both a dream and drudgery.

Conclusion

Just as the death penalty is the linchpin of the criminal justice system, based on racist fear and the need for retribution, anti-racism is the key to unlocking the neurotic interaction that perpetuates the sin of racism and blinds us to the experiences and wisdom that come from people of color from other cultures in this country and their links with the rest of the world. Combating racism in the church and in the world is the task that the church is called to at this time. If we fail to unmask racism on each of these levels and envision a church and society that is free from it, we will never truly see the face of God in each other. And if we cannot see that face and live into its reality then we will not be capable of fulfilling our baptismal vows of respecting the dignity of every person and striving for peace and justice. ●

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