

⇒ M. Shawn Copeland

«Who Is My Neighbor?»

The Challenge of Everyday Racism

The most compact definition of racism is the conjunction of prejudice and power. Prejudice implies pre-judging, coming to judgment about something or someone *prior to* experience or knowledge. Bigotry denotes the intransigent, obstinate dimension of prejudice; bigotry adheres to prejudice that has been debunked or proven false. While ignorance may account for judgments and acts of prejudice, persistence in that ignorance explains bigotry. Bigotry condenses as bias, i.e., the more or less conscious choice to be incorrect, to repress or to deny the surfacing of further questions or insights.

Racism emerges from and goes beyond prejudice and bigotry linking attitudes or feelings of superiority to the putatively legitimate exercise of power. Racism permits one racial group to impose its will through cultural, social (i.e., economic, political, technological), educational, psychological, military, or religious means upon another racial group or groups. Racism cannot and never does rely on the choices or actions of a few isolated individuals. Rather, it is structured or institutionalized, transmitted through culture, and woven into the fabric of everyday human living. Hence, racism shapes ideas, questions, and attitudes; habits and skills; regulates and codifies norms, rules, and expectations; undergirds linguistics, aesthetics, and media representation.

This article considers some of the challenges that everyday racism presents to the injunction «love your neighbor as yourself» (Lev 19:18; Luke 10:27). I argue that racism conditions our response to the command of neighbor-love in society and in church. A brief overview of the argument that follows: The *first section* uses the work of sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant to sketch out the concept of race

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as a process of social formation through which human bodies are disciplined and managed. The *second section* discusses draws on philosopher-theologian Bernard Lonergan's notion of bias to discuss racist culture as the product of ideology and bias. A casual stroll in a park may originate as nothing more than a chance to relieve boredom or enjoy fresh air, but for those men and women, who are racially «profiled» through bias as suspect or criminal or illegal, the possibility of xenophobic violence surely induces caution and fear. The *third section* asks, «Who is my neighbor?» and probes how racism conditions Christian responses to the question.

⇒ 1 Racial Formation

Sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that the concept of race «signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies» (Omi/Winant 1994, 55). These theorists contend that race is «an element of social structure rather than an irregularity within it ... a dimension of human representation rather than an illusion» (Omi/Winant 1994, 55). They argue that race is a socially constructed form of human categorization. Omi and Winant use the term racial formation to denote the complex and historically situated process through which human bodies and social structures are represented and arranged, and race is linked to the organization and rule of societies. On their account, race entails both social structure and cultural representation. Racial formation process explains several dilemmas around race including questions about racial identity and the relation of race to other forms of difference including gender and nationality. This theoretical concept also helps to clarify the relation of racism to social oppression as this may be expressed in so-called «first world» or developed nations through «economic exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence» (Young 1990, 41-59). Racial formation discredits both the romanticization of race as essence and the depiction of race as either an objective condition or an illusion. Racial formation process maintains that race is not a deviation within a given social structure, but a constant feature enmeshed within it. The explanatory power of racial formation process mediates race on both the macro- and micro-levels. On the *macro-level*, racial formation process interprets social relations, the shifting, even transhistorical meanings and valence of race in differentiated global contexts. On this level, the social construction of race and racial relations shift and change. This theoretical concept also manages various «competing

racial projects» or «efforts to institutionalize racial meanings and identities in particular social structures, notably those of the individual, family, community, and state» (Omi/Winant 1993, 5). To illustrate such management, consider that through the concealment and regulation of reservations for the indigenous people (Indians or Native Americans), the construction of race relations in the United States traditionally has congealed along a white-black biracial divide. However, in the past twenty years, the steady increase of the Latino population along with the growing visibility of Asian Americans has destabilized this biracial landscape. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva asserts that we are likely to witness the «reshuffling» of racial categories for some years to come. But, this process well may lead to «a complex and loosely organized triracial stratification system similar to that of many Latin American and Caribbean nations» (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 179). Such a triracial order would situate whites together with assimilated Latinos and mixed-race persons at the top; Asian and Middle Eastern Americans among others would qualify as «honorary whites»; and, «the collective black» including U. S. born blacks, dark-skinned Latinos, and new West Indian and African immigrants would rank at the bottom (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 180). He exposes both the «categorical porosity» (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 180) of this scale as well as its brutal capacity to generate forms of social oppression such as «colorism» or internalized preference for phenotypic whiteness, even within black and brown families. Reporting by print and television media on the number of black and brown women, who shop for skin bleaching products and the increasing number of Korean women and Chinese women and men, who seek out plastic surgery affirms his projection.

On the *micro-level* racial formation process spells out how ordinary or everyday tasks as well as the important activities may materialize as racial projects. Socialization in racially stratified cultures and societies teaches human beings to see race, and see it paradoxically when we insist that we are colorblind. Upon meeting a person for the first time, almost immediately we begin *to read* her or his race. Our interpretations and reactions to race are conditioned by norms transmitted on the macro-level and reinforced on the micro-level. We require people to act in accord with the *stereotypes* of their racial identities. Usually, these expectations are overturned: The security guard tries to block the Chicana attorney, who comes to her office in casual clothes on a Saturday, at the private elevator; she has a key. The police stop the Indian physician, who is driving slowly through an own upper-class suburban neighborhood; he is on his way home. A

small cluster of European American students look quizzically from their printed schedules to the face of the African American professor, until one asks, «Is Catholic Studies?» The students assume that blacks are not Catholics.

Another disclosure of racial formation process is the need and ability to read race accurately. The ability to categorize people—black or white, red or brown, Mexican or Indian, Chinese or Vietnamese—has become crucial for social behavior and social comfort. The inability to identify accurately a person's race provokes a mini-social crisis. Moreover as Omi and Winant point out, «We expect differences in skin color, or other racially coded characteristics, to explain social differences» (Omi and Winant 1994, 60). The very stereotypes that we insist we despise seep into our encounters with patients, police officers, surgeons, waiters, bus drivers, shoppers, hygienists, teachers, sales persons, office workers, and elected officials, whose races differ from our own.

On the *micro-level*, the many repugnant aspects of racism crowd the everyday lives of people of color, exhausting and infuriating them. Everyday activities – jogging, leisure walking, shopping, banking, dining out, registering for school, inquiring about church membership, taking a taxicab, riding a train, air travel – throb with ambiguous, often negative, currents. Racism directs these currents, interrupting interpersonal routines between whites and non-whites. Peggy McIntosh in her pioneering analysis of white racial privilege has enumerated the ways in which whites are socialized to think of their lives as morally neutral and normative. Perhaps, the most glaring distinction between the everyday concerns of whites and those of blacks is individuality. On both the macro- and micro-levels, racial formation process teaches whites to think of themselves as individuals, but to think of blacks as «different type/kind», a collective group (Yancy 2008, 20). This process confiscates black individuality and relegates it to the lumpen, to the collective; it teaches blacks to think of themselves as deviant, but to think of whites as normative. Hence, racism is not *something-out-there* that we must solve; rather racism is *in us*, sedimented in our consciousness. The critical interrogation of racial formation process uncovers racial conditioning for what it is – a set of learned attitudes, reactions, and practices. As an ideology, racism approves biased representation and ranking of human bodies and endorses exclusionary response to those bodies. As ideology, racism spawns racist culture.

⇒ 2 Racist Culture

Most basically, culture is «the set of meanings and values that informs a way of life» (Lonergan 1972, xi). These meanings coalesce through cognitive, effective, communicative, and constitutive functions to contribute to the emergence and perpetuation of a system of racial domination that also interacts dynamically with class and gender. The meanings and values, David Goldberg writes, interfere negatively with ideas, attitudes, and dispositions, norms and rules, linguistic, literary, and artistic expressions, architectural forms and media representations, practices and institutions. These cultural expressions and objects embed meanings and values that frame articulations, undertakings, and projects, that constitute a way of life. In this sense, a culture is both, and interrelatedly, a signifying system and system of material production (Goldberg 1993, 8)

In a racist culture, definition and displacement, control and mastery, violence and power obtain. Racism does not allow us to overlook race, but it does demand that we see race in particular and circumscribed ways. Despite the ambiguity of race or skin pigmentation, racist culture requires that each and every person be racially conceived, catalogued, judged, and controlled. Racism reduces each and every person to the tyranny of empiricism, to biological physiognomy. The implications of innocuous physical traits – skin color, hair texture, shape of body and head, facial features, and blood traits (e.g., sickle cell anemia) – are identified and evaluated. On this basis, each woman and man is assigned a racial designation that structures her or his relations to other women and men of the same and of different races. In this set up, one racial group is contrived as «the measure of human being» and, thus, deemed normative. Individuals and racial groups that diverge from the norm, diverge from what it means to be a human being, deviate from being human.

Racial differences in a racist culture are absolutized «by generalizing from them and claiming that they are final». If the difference is totalized, «penetrates the flesh, the blood and the genes of the victim ... it is [transmuted] into fate, destiny, heredity» (Memmi 1968, 185, 189). Once the difference mutates and becomes identical with fate or destiny or heredity, then the difference is naturalized. It engulfs not merely the individual, but all those who share the same difference.

Now, the difference penetrates profoundly and collectively; it is complete and inescapable.

Racist culture or culture founded on racial privilege is biased culture. Bias denotes the more or less conscious and deliberate choice, in the face of what we perceive to be a potential threat to our well-being, to exclude further information or data from consideration in understanding, judgment, reflection, and decision. All human beings are susceptible to bias, which distorts and inhibits our conscious performance in everyday living by blinding our understanding. Lonergan distinguishes four principal manners in which this distortion may occur – dramatic, individual, group, and general bias.

Dramatic bias takes the form of the denial of painful affect in day-to-day living. It reveals itself not only in a refusal to understand, but also to behave in certain or accepted ways and to grow in emotional health. Still, self-discovery and the integration of self-knowledge all too often may be a painful process, and insights may be unwanted. Yet, to refuse insights is to exclude further questions and their answers, and to close off or narrow one's horizon or worldview. Lonergan names the refusal and exclusion of corrective insight as *scotosis* or blindness, its consequence a *scotoma* or blind spot. As the *scotosis* becomes settled or established, it prevents the maturing of appropriate affective attitudes and behavior, debilitates healthy psychological growth, and injures the development of common sense. Dramatic bias thrives in a racist culture or a culture structured by race. Members of the dominant or privileged racial group are given permission to project their personal feelings of inadequacy on to members of dominated racial groups. When these privileged women and men do this, they not only harm themselves by blunting the invitation to self-transformation, they also cause suffering to those who are dominated and marginalized. Consider that a white man, who may not be promoted in the workplace, may assert that Affirmative Action policies and so-called quotas explain the success of his black co-worker; the man prefers not to entertain the possibility that a black woman may be more qualified. Another example: On February 27, 2006, *The New York Times* printed a story about Parisian soup kitchens that intentionally served pork to homeless children, women, and men; bias taints this practice of solidarity through the deliberate exclusion of Jews and immigrant Muslims, who do not consume pork for religious reasons. In racist culture, the dominated or marginalized also may be unable to face up to their personal inadequacies. Consider that a black university student may cite racism as the reason for her poor performance, rather than admit she did not prepared for

class. Or consider that a Puerto Rican secondary student may struggle against internalized feelings of self-doubt and, despite long hours of serious study, still fail.

Individual bias refers to conscious distortion in the development of an individual's intelligence as well as affective and experiential orientation. In a racist culture, individual bias manifests itself in stunting development through refusal human relationships and social cooperation. The refusal of opportunities to meet others who are «different» from ourselves and the repression of basic spontaneous intersubjective drives (for example, to reach out a hand to someone falling) results in distorted experiences and judgments that become the foundation for distorted understandings and conclusions about other and different women and men.

In a racist culture, group bias finds concrete expression in ethnocentrism and in forms of racial aggression and conflict in working out the common good of society. Group bias sacrifices intelligent, responsible discernment to the interests of the dominant or privileged racial group, and assiduously ignores insights that engage the experiences or interests of other groups. Their biased decisions are enforced not only through legal codes and customs, but also through regulation and surveillance. At the same time, members of this privileged group withdraw from sensitive and experiential contact with nonprivileged groups and members of society. Gated communities and enclaves, suburban sprawl, and urban gentrification attest to the refusal of the dominant group to interact with the others; while the spiraling prison population insinuates not only widening economic disparity, but also personal alienation and social anxiety. No wonder marginalized racial groups irrupt in bitterness and frustration, civil disobedience or open, sometimes violent rebellion. Contempt and rage fuels the breakdown of intergroup relations; and this breakdown interrupts the conditions for generating imaginative and intelligent insights to social problems. Group bias derails authentic human and social development and incites decline in society.

The general bias of common sense confines intelligence to the immediate and the short-term, and ignores or obfuscates the consequences of *ad hoc* measures. Practical intelligence focuses on short-term, quick fix solutions and is preoccupied with whatever is the immediately realizable. The conspiracy of general and group bias accounts for the penchant of dominant or privileged racial groups to exclude fruitful ideas that emerge from nonprivileged racial groups or to co-opt those ideas for selfish and expedient means.

Dramatic, individual, group, and general bias of common sense clarify race as social and ideological construction and racism as ideology. In this way, bias accounts both for the asymmetry of racial ranking and the reproduction of racism through everyday experiences, choices, and decisions.

⇒ 3 «Who Is My Neighbor?»

In the Gospel of Luke, a lawyer approaches Jesus to ask what should be done to inherit eternal life? Jesus' reply points the lawyer to the ancient longing and prayer of their people. The lawyer knows what he must do to inherit eternal life: «You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself» (Lk 10:25-28).

Perhaps the lawyer seeks to prolong the conversation or perhaps he wishes to justify himself. Still, he presses the further question, «Who is my neighbor?» Theologian Ian McFarland suggests that we need not view his inquiry «as prompted purely by the selfish desire to avoid censure or minimize responsibility. If nothing less than eternal life hangs on my love of neighbor, then it is only natural that I should want to determine just who my neighbor is» (McFarland 2001, 59).

In reply, Jesus tells a parable. A man (presumably Jewish, we do not know) is assaulted on his way to Jericho and left for dead by the roadside. A priest and a Levite see the man, but pass by, without helping him. Perhaps these men were en route to religious events and, thus, were concerned not to violate laws pertaining to ritual purity that forbade contact with a corpse or unclean person. In this instance, fidelity to legal prescription would not have allowed them to stop; possibly, others were assembled and waiting for their arrival. Or perhaps caution and fear inhibited the priest and the Levite from responding. The Jericho road has been described as winding, dangerous, and conducive to ambush. Perhaps, the men were nervous that robbers might be hiding in the immediate vicinity; if they stopped, they might put themselves in danger. Or perhaps, the men worried that the man was faking his injuries in order to trap them; to stop might be a gamble with their lives and perhaps the well being of their families.

In this parable, the outsider to Judaism, the Samaritan performs the Torah command of compassion for the neighbor (Lev 19:18). The Samaritan seemingly is unconcerned about ritual norms or consequences. He helps the battered man, tends his wounds, takes him to safety and shelter, instructs the innkeeper not to stint on his

care, and pledges to meet all expenses. Jesus asks, «Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?» The lawyer replies, «The one who showed him mercy.» Jesus said to him, «Go and do likewise» (Luke 10: 36-37).

Jesus commands the lawyer and us to «imitate the Samaritan's compassion without giving any specific criteria regarding those to whom compassion is owed» (McFarland 2001, 60). A straightforward interpretation of the parable teaches that the neighbor is the one who needs our compassion and care. However, another and subtle reading focuses on the charge that concludes the passage: «Go and do likewise». The parable contests cultural and religious exclusion; putatively despised Samaritan identity becomes worthy of imitation through fidelity to Torah. Jesus' charge to the lawyer and to us turns the spotlight on us «as moral agent[s] capable of being or failing to be a neighbor to someone else» (McFarland 2001, 60).

Racist culture seeks to constrict Christian answers to the question of the neighbor. As biased violation of neighbor-love, racism privatizes religion, polices group belonging, and endangers Christian community. Yet, Christianity has facilitated the articulation of racial ideology in society. Goldberg observes that secular modernity reverberates with the religious, poaches religious terms and gestures, while injecting these with new or bowdlerized meanings. George Frederickson and Kelly Brown Douglas explicate how the roots of racism lie deep in Christian anti-Judaism as murderous hatred that was transmuted into virulent anti-Semitism. Frederickson maintains that «antisemitism became racism when the belief took hold that Jews were intrinsically and organically evil» rather than mere adherents to false doctrine (Frederickson 2002, 19). He traces the two principal forms of modern racism, color-graded white supremacy and essentialist anti-Semitism to late medieval and early modern periods attitudes and practices. However, in order «to achieve its full potential as an ideology, racism had to be emancipated from Christian universalism» (Frederickson 2002, 46). In other words, racism as ideology upended Christianity's argument of human equality before God with an appeal to that same God's (revealed) decree that some human beings could be marked in perpetuity as pariahs or slaves. During the medieval period, the biblical myth of the Curse of Canaan (Gen 9: 18-25) was applied to various peoples, but it was attached decisively to Africans during the transatlantic trade, whether they were baptized Christians or not.

Divine ordination of difference and the separate development of groups and cultures lay at the core of South African apartheid.

Theologian John De Gruchy states that where cultural imperialism and racism are regimented they deny «the community of believers the possibility of being human and [deny] the reconciling and humanizing work of Christ» (De Gruchy, 1983, 169). Hence, racism courts heresy on two fronts: First, racism sanctions idolatry; it usurps the position, power, and role of God, sacralizing race above all, even metaphorically ontologizing aesthetic representation to racialize divinity. Dominant or privileged groups mimic God, wielding near absolute power over the bodies, persons, and lives of members of nonprivileged racial groups. Second, racism negates the doctrine of human creation, *the imago Dei*, by lowering the transcendental end for which human beings are created. Hence, nonprivileged individuals and groups are subjugated to the intentions and whims of dominant or privileged racial groups.

The Roman Catholic bishops of the United States in their pastoral letter on racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, declare racism an evil, which endures in society and in church.

Racism is a sin; a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father (*Brothers and Sisters to Us* 1979, 3).

Racism takes the form of personal, structural or systemic sin against the neighbor and against the church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27). It defiles the sacrament and celebration of the Eucharist and disrupts communion ecclesiology, which «refers to union with God but also communion among members of the human community» (Phelps 2009, 116-117). If the greeting of peace is exchanged between worshippers of different races, but a member of the dominant racial group literally wipes his hands as if to remove stain; if the Eucharistic cup is withheld from a Latino communicant, but offered to the white man who next approaches, then the local ecclesial community no longer signifies «the visible sacrament of the invisible communion of humankind with God and one another because of God (Phelps 2009, 117). Such racist behaviors are sins against the body of Christ and vitiate the call to radical communion in Christ and ridicule God's gracious self-gift.

The parable of the Good Samaritan challenges the church to relinquish racist attitudes, habits, and practices, and to take up responsibilities of resistance and renewed articulation. To resist racist culture and its ideology, which has shaped everyday living, race and racism needs must be taken seriously. Taking race and racism

seriously means to reject liberal modernity's reduction of race to a morally irrelevant category and of racism to the personal prejudices of individuals. Taking race and racism seriously uncovers liberal modernity's history of racist ideology, construction of race, and obfuscation of those racist exclusions and brutalities that are concealed beneath its self-promoting master narratives. In addition, this resistance calls the church to repentance of its own history of racism and complicity in exclusionary values, criteria, and practices. Insofar as Christianity has participated in the articulation of racist ideology, the church is challenged to articulate new values, new criteria, and new practices. In this endeavor, the church calls upon the Holy Spirit, who nurtures and sustains our desire for life – for freedom. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the church learns to repudiate the reduction of human persons to stereotypes or mere racial categories, statistics or social problems. With the help of the Spirit, the church may grasp women and men as instances of the intelligible as intelligent in the world, instances of incarnate moral and ethical choice in a world under the influence of sin, yet standing in relation to a field of supernatural grace. This new articulation must reiterate the Christian notion of the person – acknowledging, confessing, and testifying that all human beings bear the imprint of the divine image and likeness and have a share in the divine life. And, this reiteration witnesses that our communion unity remains incomplete unless we honor the riches of human diversity and differences that are gifts of the Spirit.

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