

BEING, IDENTITY AND BELIEF

A Christian Basis for Pursuing Racial Justice

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Introduction

The challenge for any society divided along the lines of ethnicity or people group (race) (See figure 1), religion, sexual orientation, gender and culture, is the recognition that politically, economically, socially and spiritually, that society becomes and remains poorer. Yet, these are essential differences which make up the identity of each person. As Christians, whose existence is fixed by faith in a loving God, we battle against the overt and hidden causes and forms of racism. If this endeavour is to be redemptive and sustainable, two principles are vital: One, it is imperative that we resist the mild form of 'neo-colonialism' of merely 'doing-on-behalf-of' marginalized people, despite its importance, and harness the strength of our oneness in Christ as the basis for 'identifying-with' them in all our work to defeat racism. You see, the victim and the perpetrator of racism are fellow human beings. Two, as a consequence, we must take seriously three core features of life which inspire and determine the depth and quality of our work. These are: Being, Identity and Belief, considered as possessing *essential* and *existential* characteristics.

I intend to show here, on the one hand, that Being, Identity and Belief constitute our *essential* nature, and are foundational to our struggle for justice and the defeat of racism. This structure comprises core features because Being, Identity and Belief embody without condition our *essential* distinctive differences, yet respects our unity, which is rooted in God. That is, we recognise the fact that each person exists in common with, and belongs to the nature of the whole human family, having been created in the image of God.

ETHNICITY OR RACE?

Scientists have increasingly questioned the concept of 'race', despite its popular usage in the public discourse. It is convincingly argued that the difference *between* different people groups to which 'race' refers accounts approximately for only 5%, whilst the differences which occur *within* people groups, is reckoned to be approximately 85%. (See Stephen Cohen on Ethnicity, Class and Immigration)

Figure 1

Being

Image and ‘God-talk’, that is, the truth we recognise and speak, but seem to fail to practice, often hark back to or prefigure our belief that human beings have their essential being in the likeness and Being of God (*Genesis 1:26*), notably as it is revealed in Jesus Christ. Our created likeness which is manifested in Christ also reveals our true being, or that which commonly unites all humanity, its essential validity: ‘He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation.’ (Colossians 1:15). It is first in the being of God, therefore, that all human beings have ultimate worth and validity, and in Him human beings come to their fullest and truest meaning. Christian teaching and moral precept oblige us, therefore, to appropriate this self-understanding. If we maintain what is usually considered a Euro-centric view of the world, where one ethnic group (See Figure 2) takes power and dominion over all others, we ultimately guarantee the continuation of segregation and the disregard of powerless and marginalized people, falsely, as not belonging.

Being and belonging

It is morally, theologically and anthropologically acceptable, therefore, that we must not merely regard black and minority ethnic people as ‘deserving’ respect and inclusion, but reject racism as the sin¹ of exclusion, disrespect and ‘segregation’ by grasping and cherishing the fact that all God’s children inherently share in the dignity of the Being of God. The great American Christian leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr Martin Luther King Jr.² understood this well, and cites an abundance of evidence against the idea of inferior and superior ‘races’. History had perpetuated and supported this idea, including many like the great Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume has had the greatest positive impact on modern intellectual history concerning religion and culture; but he is also known to have remarked: ‘I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general

¹ Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, *Redeeming the Time*, (CTBI, London: 2003), p. 4ff.

² James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope*, The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., (Harper San Francisco: 1986), p.211. (Hereafter, ATH).

all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There was never a civilised nation of any other complexion than white...’ (*Essay on National Characters*, 1753). It is on these ideas that white supremacists ideologies and all current forms of racism are based. But contrary to the superiority-inferiority myth, as Christians we must affirm our intrinsic unity as people who ‘belong’ to God, and as such, to His Church, and that all are fully one with human community. This is the *essential* reality of Being.

Then, on the other hand, it becomes necessary to deal with the *existential* questions of every day life: our options, preferences, the ‘deep yearnings’ for meaning and participation, for just dealings in accessing education and public services, and for specialisation. These are often cultural choices people make, and could be understood fundamentally as secondary to the essence of what it means to be and belong, but they are necessary for maintaining our vitality. Being and belonging in a society divided along ethnic or cultural lines, however, presuppose and demands the reconciliation of all peoples, ethnic groups so divided.

THE WORD ‘ETHNIC’

In reality the word 'ethnic' refers to *all* people because *all* people have ethnicity. In other words, each person belongs to a people group: Asian, white, black, all have a particular heritage. In order to be careful not to reinforce exactly what we are trying to defeat - racism and discrimination - African, African Caribbean, mixed heritage and Asian peoples in Britain are understood as minorities, simply in terms of numbers. White people in Britain are the majority. Whilst people prefer self-definition, ‘minority ethnic’, with the emphasis on ‘minority’ respects those minority identities because it emphasises ‘minority’, rather than ‘ethnicity’. To emphasize ethnicity is to deny it to white people, and to use it negatively to segregate minority ethnicities from white ethnicities.

Consequently, even though it is widely used, 'ethnic minority' should be avoided as it places the emphasis wrongly on the ethnicity of African, African Caribbean, and Asian and mixed heritage people as the only ones that possess ethnicity. As such 'ethnic minority', for all intents and purposes means someone that is marginalized, excluded and unwanted in society, because those terms have attracted grossly negative connotations for minority ethnic groups in Britain.

'Ethnic group', 'ethnic community', 'the ethnics' 'ethnic minorities', 'ethnic people' as references to minorities in Britain are all linguistically incorrect, socially offensive, and does nothing to help our case against racism and racial discrimination.

Figure 2

To be reconciled

Recognition of, and identification with people of minority ethnic heritages can only be genuinely upheld and sustained when each individual is understood in his or her *essential*

nature, potentiality and promise. The denial of this leads to exclusion and racism. Institutional racism is exclusion on the basis of colour or culture by processes or practices. In the churches, where black and minority ethnic people adhere in large numbers, institutional racism is clearly manifested by the lack of black and minority ethnic leaders at the 'highest levels'. While some may not choose leadership responsibility, many may have yearnings or the call of God and the skills or potential for such positions in ministry; but uses of power in some institutions and churches still prohibit progress, and the need for repentance and reconciliation remains critical. The acceptance of our oneness in dignity under God, and the practice of 'respect and belonging' can assist the church's redemptive purpose also as a single act of *reparation*, not necessarily monetary reparation, but the recognition of unity of being and identity, which could lead to genuine reconciliation.

Identity

Identity is found and validated in Christological concreteness. Here, the Person and Work of Christ, not only underscores the identity of human beings founded upon the likeness, but offers renewal to that identity (1 Corinthians 5:17). We are human beings commonly because God created us thus, and we are renewed as Christ re-established our new identity in his Being, God's self-giving. But economic, social and political factors have been used to promote, falsely, the notion of separate *essential* identities.

The problem emerges when black and minority ethnic people are defined in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. This is a pathology that seeks to dehumanise a person in order to justify inhuman and degrading treatment of that person. From a British perspective, English people defined the Irish in relation to national identity. For her Doctoral thesis at the University of Sheffield Department of Sociological Studies, Nicola Piper conducted extensive research on this issue, pointing to the English conception of the Irish as a 'race' based on the nineteenth century notion of 'scientific racism'. Scientific racism referred to a 'separate physical type of people with a range of negative social and cultural characteristics.'³ Discrimination on these grounds simply denied people the reality of an identity common to all people.

³ Nicola Piper, *Racism, Nationalism, and Citizenship*, (Ashgate, Aldershot: 1998), p. 59.

As human beings we are aware of our *existential*, ethnic and cultural identities, which can be changeable, but our essential identity is rooted in the Being of God, who identifies with us in His Person as revealed in Jesus Christ. Human beings in their essential identity are not distinct therefore from each other, nor do the existential (religious, cultural etc.) character diminishes or damages what is essential. The plumber, surgeon, painter of works of art, or sower may be matters of cultural choice, and cultures are fluid, but each person shares immutably in a common identity. Each may have a different ethnicity: Asian, African, African Caribbean, white, mixed heritage, but each shares that common identity. This is vital to the Christian belief system (see Acts 17:24-28), and must inform why and how we work for racial justice.

Belief

It is of course essential for Christians actively to express their faith, their belief; this expression constitutes expression as an aspect of their essential being and identity, e.g., a Christian may be female and Asian. Yet, belief here does not require a gradation of value in terms of this identity, not least of course, ethnic value. But one may also be Christian and artist; here identity does not fully constitute the essence of what it means to be, because art is choice and changeable, and being and likeness is founded in the being and likeness of God. The basic form of belief in this regard is an understanding of *all* our created nature in relation to the nature of God.

Moreover, as image and belief, being, in practice, constitutes the whole person; but personhood is not conditional upon the expressions in our choices in art or careers. Racism emerges often from fear, but as King stressed, white people must master fear, and ‘depend not only on their commitment to Christian love, but also on the Christlike love which the Negro [black and minority ethnic person] generates towards them.’⁴ When we believe, we take seriously the tenets of our faith, not only that we love God and are our brother’s and sister’s keeper, but we love human beings as we love our *essential* selves, not always our existential wanderings (sometimes we hate our own actions or choices – the non-essential self).

⁴ James T Washington, ATH, p. 514.

When combating racism, it is important, therefore, to acknowledge that racism is a challenge to God's authority, to our being and identity. There is ample evidence for this challenge, which is rooted in modern philosophical and cultural history, as expounded, for example, in the works of the Enlightenment agnostic philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche. He justified his own unbelief and negatively influenced Christian history by saying: 'Man no longer says, "I shall" because of God, but he says, "I will because I will."' (*Will to Power*). This is not only a denial of God, but also a repudiation of the dominion God gave human beings over things of the earth, which Christian theologian, Stephen Wright, recognises. He warns: 'Instead of being ruler under God, the world rules man. What should be shared dominion has become dominion of oppression and subservience.' (*Growing into God*).

Conclusion

It is my view that, taken together, Being, Identity and Belief, therefore, renders racism and racial discrimination, or the division or gradation of our essential identity fundamentally un-Christian, illogical and fragmentary. It is a denial of our essence; for all men and women are created equal. Racism flies in the face of this truth. Being, Identity and Belief enable us to build on our common identity in defiance of racism, and share the responsibility for this task. It is essential.

All forms of racism are ultimately unsustainable because they are not only evil, but racism tries to subvert the essential identity of *all* human beings. We as Christians must embrace difference and be 'richer' by undergoing a measure of cultural integration, recognise our human interdependence, promote social and economic redistribution, and pursue ethnic harmony, so that our Being is being-in-love-for-one-another'. This does not entail 'giving up our identity', which on the one hand is impossible.

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