

The Color Barrier

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I want to talk today about an issue that has arisen in this election, and that is the issue of race, and particularly the issue of election of people of color to public office. For the choices presented to the voters by the major party tickets ensure that one of two barriers will be broken on Tuesday. Either we will have the first president with appreciable African heritage, or we will have the first woman vice president. History will be made either way.

But what is the meaning of that history? I want today to reflect on the meaning of the color barrier. Now I don't mean this to be an implicit endorsement of one candidate, but I am not going to spend an equivalent amount of time on the gender barrier, because I think that we make a mistake when we pose a false equivalency between the two. Race is not sex, it pushes different buttons in us and it is handled differently on the public and private stages of our lives. I'm not saying that one is more important than the other as an issue or that the depth of oppression based on sex is more or less damaging than oppression based on skin color. But I can barely skim the surface of one of these huge issues in the time I have this morning, and I don't want to dilute what I say by a spurious even-handedness.

Race, as you are probably aware, has no scientific basis in fact, but this does not prevent it from having served as one of our guiding myths and most powerful social constructs for four hundred years. During that time, race has had a major impact on our political life.

What I want to convey to you today is that we have had through centuries of history not just of the United States but the world, a war between a professed ideal of equality of all people and a strong feeling of the inferiority of certain peoples, especially the native peoples of the Americas and those of Africa south of the Sahara and their descendants. This war between ideal and prejudice has been a driving force in much of our national political life.

Theologically, religious liberals have tended to read this gap between our ideals and our performance against the orthodox Christian notion of Original Sin. Though both Unitarianism and Universalism reject original sin, we have nevertheless tended to look on racism as inherent, inevitable, in the nature of things. I will argue that this does our religion a disservice.

Racism was not invented by the modern age. Fourteenth Century Arab writers referred to people for sub-Saharan Africa as little more than beasts¹. And the Spanish after 1492 developed an

¹ In the 14th century CE, the Tunisian Ibn Khaldun wrote:

"beyond [known peoples of black West Africa] to the south there is no civilization in the proper sense. There are only humans who are closer to dumb animals than to rational beings. They live in thickets and caves, and eat herbs and unprepared grain. They frequently eat each other. They cannot be considered human beings." "Therefore,

elaborate system of racial classification that they exported to their colonies in the New World.

But three developments in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries impacted on European racism. First was the rise of science, the scientific method and the Enlightenment. Second was the colonization of the Americas and the violence visited on the aboriginal inhabitants. And third was the African slave trade.

The latter two were clearly in tension with the Christian command to love your neighbor as yourself. If Indians and Africans were fully human, it was hard to justify killing them, taking their land or enslaving them. So the developing disciplines of science were enlisted and modern “scientific” racism was born. This lent a veneer of respectability to the degradations being visited on native and African populations: these people were less than fully human. This came to a head in the Nineteenth Century; the discipline of Anthropology was founded to explain the differences between the races; in the early Twentieth Century, it basically concluded that it could find none, and that conclusion has subsequently been reinforced by genetics. But of course, “scientific” racism took on a life of its own with the racist regimes of the Third Reich, resulting in the tragedy of the Holocaust.

Racism, the assumption of the inferiority of Africans and African-descended people, accounts for their startling absence from public office for all of U. S. history, with the exception of Reconstruction, down to the last two decades of the Twentieth Century. After all, we were supposedly founded as a democracy, and African-descended people have always comprised a substantial portion of the population; the fact that they have so rarely held public office until recently is what I am calling the color barrier.

From what I have read, the barrier was at first what lawyers called *de jure*, enshrined in law. For example, South Carolina’s first constitution extended voting rights only to white male property holders. If you weren’t in any of those classes, you couldn’t vote, and only those who could vote for a public office were qualified to hold it. But even in states like Massachusetts and New York, which did not have a racial qualification for voting in their first constitutions, the color barrier was effective *de facto* because of the assumption of inferiority.

Vermont has the distinction of electing, in 1836, the first African American to its state legislature, a man named Alexander Lucius Twilight, who was also the first black college graduate. John Mercer Langston, was elected town clerk of Brownhelm Township, Ohio in 1855². Those were two of only three black elected officials before the Civil War that I have been able to find.

the Negro nations are, as a rule, submissive to slavery, because (Negroes) have little that is (essentially) human and possess attributes that are quite similar to those of dumb animals, as we have stated.”[38][39]

In the same period, the Egyptian Al-Abshibi (1388-1446) wrote, "It is said that when the [black] slave is sated, he fornicates, when he is hungry, he steals." [40] Wikipedia, “Racism”

²“Famous Firsts by African Americans” at <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhmfirsts.html>

Outside the South, I think this fact is due more to pervasive racism than to legal impediments. Such a liberal of his day as Abraham Lincoln said in his debates with Stephen Douglass in 1858 “I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office...”

Then came the war. As Lincoln said in his Gettysburg Address, the Civil War was a great a terrible testing ground of the proposition that all are created equal. By the end of the war, slavery had been brought to an end. But this left the black population of the south almost worse off, for they had no political or economic power. So the Reconstruction Congress enacted the Fifteenth Amendment, which provided voting rights for all regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

As a result of this and the disenfranchisement of whites who had supported the Confederacy, blacks were elected to public office for the first time. Joseph Rainey was the first black in the U.S. House of Representatives, representing Charleston, South Carolina for four terms. Hiram Revels was Senator from Mississippi for about a year in 1870, and P.B.S. Pinchback was appointed Governor of Louisiana while the elected governor was under impeachment proceedings.

Of course, Reconstruction was a time of immense corruption, and was concluded with an ignominious compromise in 1876 which immediately ousted all the African American officeholders. Thereafter Jim Crow moved into the south to stay.

The Fourteenth Amendment, passed after the Civil War, had guaranteed equal protection of the laws not only before the federal government but in the states. But a series of court decisions in the 1870s largely eviscerated this provision, and the crowning disgrace was Plessy vs. Ferguson in 1896, which said that a legal regime which separated the races was not unconstitutional if they were treated equally.

It was not until the 1930s that this principle started being questioned in the courts. An NAACP team under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston brought and won suits to get blacks into white law schools, then colleges, before they started to work on lower school desegregation. In the early 1950s, Marshall personally litigated Briggs vs. Elliott in South Carolina, the first suit to hold that at the elementary and secondary level, separate was inherently unequal. Before the U.S. Supreme Court, this suit was consolidated with two other southern suits and a case from Kansas. For political reasons, the court put the non-Southern case first and we know it now as Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka. Thurgood Marshall was the chief attorney for the NAACP on the case.

The Court’s decision in Brown overturned Plessy, holding that separate was inherently unequal. As we know, it took another generation for this decision to be felt in the schools. And it was not until passage of the Voting Rights Acts in 1965 that major changes started to happen with respect to political power for African Americans.

And the agent for that change was not primarily the Supreme Court decision, but a grassroots movement whose most prominent spokesperson was Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963 restated the case for an American ideal of equality which had been

stated in the Declaration of Independence, in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, in the anti-slavery movement.

What is not often quoted in that speech is what preceded the "I have a dream" rhetoric. King set up an elaborate metaphor of a check. The black people of America had come to cash a check, which had been returned marked insufficient funds. But he refused to believe that the bank of America was bankrupt.

It was a powerful figure of speech, but it proceeds from a different place than the dream rhetoric. It is a demand for justice. This represented perhaps the defining aspect of the civil rights movement – a demand for justice.

It's my thesis that the black politicians since the Civil Rights Movement who have attracted a lot of white voters have been those who distance themselves from this demand for justice. Jesse Jackson was identified with the demand, and never got far in his quest for the presidency. By contrast, Edward Brooke, Douglas Wilder, Deval Patrick and now Barack Obama have been able to attract white votes by distancing themselves to some extent from the demand for racial justice. Why is this?

White liberals such as myself who recognize the gap between American ideals and the reality of black life in America sign on to this demand for justice. But the downside of the black demand for justice is that it gives conservative forces a focus around which to organize, to resist the claim for justice.

This is nowhere better seen than in the first two African American Supreme Court Justices. When Thurgood Marshall was appointed to the Court in 1967, liberals applauded. It was so fitting that the man who had been so associated with the fight for racial justice should be rewarded with a seat at the table of power.

In the 1980s, the pleasure of liberals then turned to outrage at the nomination of Clarence Thomas to succeed Marshall. Thomas was a conservative, he stood against everything that Marshall had been for – and he was black. It was truly galling, though hard for a white to say, to have Marshall's seat occupied by someone who was a traitor to what from my viewpoint was the political interests of African Americans.

I think the conflict between ideals and reality in our public life mirrors a conflict we have in our souls.

There has been a lot of talk recently about the impact that the so-called "Bradley effect" may have on the Presidential race. The "Bradley effect" applies to political races where one candidate is black, and it is the discrepancy between what likely voters tell the pollsters they will do and what they actually do in the voting booth. It is named for Tom Bradley, the black mayor of Los Angeles, who lost his run for governor of California despite polls which showed he was ahead. The effect is sometimes called the Wilder effect after Douglas Wilder, who became the first elected black governor of a state in 1990, but who did not win by the comfortable margin the polls predicted. The theory behind this effect is that white voters will tell the pollsters that they are supporting the black candidate, because that's socially acceptable but when they get into the voting booth, their inherent racism takes

over and they just can't cast a ballot for a black.

Whether the "Bradley effect" will have any impact on this election remains to be seen, but it points to a some gap between our ideals and our actual behavior.

You may have seen an op-ed piece in the New York Times a few days ago by Nicholas Kristof, entitled, "What, Me Biased?" He details the work of some social scientists with something called an implicit association test and concludes "considerable evidence suggests that while the vast majority of Americans truly believe in equality and aspire to equal opportunity for all, our minds aren't as egalitarian as we think they are." I took the implicit association test on my home computer. It projects pictures of whites and African Americans and words that have either a good or bad connotation. You have to act very fast, before you have any capacity for reflection. In some sections of the test, you are asked to press the right key if the face is African American or the word has a good connotation. In other sections, you press the right key if the face is white or the word has a good connotation. What the test tries to find out is whether you react faster when good is paired with white than when it is paired with African American. MY results were that I have a slight preference for whites over blacks, at this subliminal level.

And this reinforces what I already know about myself. While I espouse equality and have since my teenage years deplored the treatment of African Americans in this country and particularly in my native South, I have pockets of hidden racism in my psyche. The other day I parked my bike outside a store and considered locking it just because a young black man was sitting there. I didn't lock it, but I was ashamed of the thought.

Such thoughts engender the same kind of guilt in me as do sexual thoughts. Guilt over these stray thoughts can really drive us batty if we let them, but in my spiritual work I have learned that such unwanted thoughts are just the price of being human, and having a brain that has been wired by millennia of evolution to have certain instincts. You learn to control your sexual thoughts in your words and actions, and you learn to control for your unconscious racism as well. Let me return now to Original Sin. We have in our Association a commitment to eliminating racism, and a program for such in our churches. Thandeka, our UU African American theologian, has been critical of the UUAQ anti-racism program, pointing out that a guilt-based approach to eliminating racism is bottomed on Original Sin, and both our Unitarian and Universalist sides reject Original Sin.³ It is easy for liberals to fall in the trap of guilt when thinking about race.

The doctrine of original sin looks to a sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross as a means of atonement. While many if not most of us will reject this idea theologically, it is deeply woven into Western culture and ways of thought, and easily transferred to the history of racism. So I pose the question, does the prospect of a black man being president please us because we see it somehow absolving us of our original sin of racism? Is it redemption from the fires of hell we are looking for?

³"Why Anti-Racism Will Fail" by Thandeka
http://www.meadville.edu/journal/1999_thandeka_1_1.pdf

Because we're not supposed to believe in hell.

I put to you the thought that voting for a candidate because he is black is just as racist as voting against him because he is black. Of course we always project on our politicians the forces at work in our own souls, but it is shortsighted to expect that the election of a black president will somehow expiate four hundred years of racial oppression in our history, or the dark corners of race prejudice lurking in our individual souls. It does not live up to Dr. King's dream of judging him not on the color of his skin but on the content of his character.

The new generation of African-American politicians garner support from white voters by appearing to transcend race, by promising to overcome divisions of class, race, generation, geography. They ask to be considered on the basis of their platforms, their intelligence, what they can do for the state or nation. They do not claim to be representing the demands for justice of generations of African Americans.

We have to live with our racism no matter who is elected on Tuesday, and we have to continue to work on eliminating it from our psyches and from our public life. It will be a long haul. But progress in important things is never easy.

The doctrine of Original Sin asks for restoration of the perfect state before the fall. It measures down from that perfect state. Universalism measures up. It says, "see how far we've come." We are inveterate optimists. Original sin is a stuck place from which to attack the problems of racism. I think we have seen a subtle shift in our approach to racism in Unitarian Universalism with the election of our first UUA black president Bill Sinkford, and the nomination for president of the whole country of a biracial candidate has advanced and will advance the conversation on race that we so desperately need to have. We can celebrate as a milestone in the struggle with racism that one of the candidates for president is visibly of partial African descent, without expecting absolution, perfection or an immediate end to racism.

Racism is at bottom a spiritual sickness to which the antidote is love. It is love for each other and for this great country of which we are a part that ultimately holds the promise of redemption for all of us. So I end with the prayer we will sing in a moment: no matter who wins on Tuesday, God bless America. Amen.

Readings:

[Declaration of Independence] *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

[U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 2] *Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.*

[Petition from the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery Signed by Benjamin Franklin, President of the Pennsylvania Society, February 3, 1790] *That mankind are all formed by the same Almighty being, alike objects of his Care & equally designed for the Enjoyment of Happiness the Christian Religion teaches us to believe & the Political Creed of America fully coincides with the Position. Your Memorialists, particularly engaged in attending to the Distresses arising from Slavery, believe it their indispensable Duty to present this Subject to your notice. They have observed with great Satisfaction that many important & salutary Powers are vested in you for "promoting the Welfare & Securing the blessings of liberty to the "People of the United States." And as they conceive, that these blessings ought rightfully to be administered, without distinction of Colour, to all descriptions of People, so they indulge themselves in the pleasing expectation, that nothing, which can be done for the relive of the unhappy objects of their care, will be either omitted or delayed.*

[Gettysburg Address] *Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."*

[Martin Luther King Dream speech]

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his

lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.