

Is God a White Racist?

by Matt Tittle

Is God a White Racist? The public offering of this question is simply an act of moral courage that all churches will need to show if we are going to chip away at institutional racism and the more pertinent issues of inequality and oppression in this country. We aren't going to solve racism today. I'm going to focus on a deeper structure that keeps racial inequality firmly in place. That is, traditional theological interpretations of Hebrew and Christian scripture that disempower human beings and encourage them to accept a suffering servant role in the face of seemingly insurmountable oppression. Unless we can unravel and dismantle the religious scaffolding that supports them, we can't even begin to tackle racism, sexism, classism, or any other oppression.

I borrowed the unusual title from Dr. William Jones' 1973 book of the same title. The book cover displays the title on the sign of a country church. The question, "Is God a White Racist?" is, on one level, merely a test of theodicy. Theodicy is the study of how the existence of a good or benevolent God is reconciled with the undeniable existence of evil in the world. I said we had shown courage in putting the public question out there. What we have done is simply recognized and named out loud the "elephant in the room" of every church in America.

"Is God a white racist?" As is often the case with the elusive pachyderm, most churches, regardless of the skin colors of those who attend, don't even know the elephant is there. They cannot see it, touch it, or smell it. No worries. They might notice occasional elephant tracks, droppings, or beds, but that isn't enough evidence for them to really believe in the elephant.

Other churches choose to ignore the elephant. They know it exists and would rather it weren't in the room, but if they pretend that it isn't, maybe it will get bored and go away.

Many churches actually feed this already too large elephant. They defer to it, take care of it, and clean up after it so that it doesn't make too much of a mess. But they are resolved to live *with* it.

Other churches expend a lot of effort trying to get rid of the elephant. They feel good about themselves when the elephant leaves for a while. But when elephants are out and about, on the roam, they are very destructive, uprooting trees and destroying ecosystems. What's more, elephants are territorial and always come back. Religion is a place this elephant likes to be. This elephant is comfortable in most churches, synagogues, and temples. This is an interfaith pachyderm, which causes additional trouble for the anti-pachydermists!

Now you might still be asking, "What does the elephant in this analogy represent?" Is it racism? It could be, but it goes deeper than that. I contend that racism, perceived or actual, and the racial tension that seems to be a part of daily life in America, are simply "presenting problems." Many schools of thought in medicine, and particularly in the mental-health professions, try to look beyond the presenting problem for the deeper pathology that needs to be addressed and resolved. Racial difference is a presenting problem that manifests itself visibly, literally through skin pigmentation, but really has no bearing on any actual differences between peoples around the world. There are a few extremists who still consider the color of skin to be a causal predictor of human intelligence and worth, but at least in the U.S. I don't think very many people truly believe that the biology of skin color makes a lick of difference. The more likely culprit for our elephant analogy is the cultural and economic *inequality* on which our nation was founded.

Our nation was founded on the principles of freedom and equality. This is the real elephant in the room—the inconsistency between words and deeds in our society. The old cliché, “Do as I say, not as I do” has special meaning here, because it might as well be carved in stone as the American creed. We are long on words and short on deeds when it comes to equality. At least we are quick to speak and slow to act. Unitarian Universalists are no exception.

With our message of universal love and acceptance, our goal of world peace, and our devotion to justice, you might think that Unitarian Universalist congregations are elephant-free zones. Not a chance. Unitarian Universalist churches can and do fall into all of the categories I described. One who understands our tenets might assume that we have great resources with which to combat racism, and would be on the cutting edge of anti-racist work in America. But our track record on racial equality is actually quite poor. Even though you might imagine it would have solidified resolve, our Association was in more conflict than ever in the years immediately following Unitarian Universalist Minister James Reeb’s beating death in 1965 at the hands of white attackers after he participated in the March on Selma, Alabama. Issues of race threatened to split our Association as many delegates to the 1969 General Assembly in Boston walked out in disagreement over the details of funding for the Association’s Black Action Council and the Black and White Alliance. Just three years earlier, the year after Reeb was killed, Martin Luther King, Jr. had been the distinguished Ware Lecturer at General Assembly.

So, certainly we have made progress, haven’t we? I’m not convinced. The entire Journey Toward Wholeness anti-racism program, developed in the 1990s, is now being reevaluated largely because it has been neither popular nor effective in our congregations. The Reverend Dr. Thandeka, one of our movements leading theologians, offered a scathing criticism of that program at the 1999 General Assembly. She said it violated our first UU principle of affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person because it indirectly promotes a doctrine of original sin; that it makes erroneous assumptions about the nature and structure of power in America, namely that all whites are racist and that no blacks are racist; and that it misinterprets actions resulting from feelings of shame and powerlessness as evidence of white racism by calling for a blanket white confession of their racism.¹ I agree with Thandeka that we have been approaching anti-racism programs in our movement from the wrong perspective and based on erroneous assumptions.

A new anti-racist and multicultural Welcoming Congregation program is currently being developed to model the success of our Association’s Welcoming Congregation program for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues. The new JUUST Change anti-oppression consultancy program, designed to meet congregations “where they are” along their journey. With these new initiatives, I maintain hope, and yet our troubles with racial issues as a larger faith community continue. At our 2005 General Assembly in Ft. Worth, several UU youth of color were questioned about their right to be at the closing ceremonies. The situation became so volatile that the social event that evening was altogether cancelled. During that week, other youth of color were mistaken by UUs for hotel employees and asked to carry luggage.

I don’t mention our shortfalls so that we might feel ashamed or assign self-blame for the problems of racism. To do so would be to fall into the trap of false assumptions that Thandeka raises. If you hear no other message today, hear this one. Guilt and shame around racial inequality is irrational and counterproductive. As Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed noted in his 1980 book, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, “We do not stand above the social attitudes our times, as we are prone to believe, but instead flounder about in their midst with everyone else.”² And this takes me back to the question at hand and how

asking the question can help us to stop floundering and start changing the status quo, while maintaining and deepening our faith.

So, *IS* God a white racist? The short, heretical, and historically blasphemous answer can only be YES. If there exists a sentient being who created and controls the universe and intervenes in human lives, then that God can only be a malevolent, racist, sexist, classist, or otherwise discriminatory God, because too many people in the world are perpetually oppressed. This is what William Jones calls divine racism. Within this notion of divine racism there is an *in*-group and an *out*-group. God decides the groups based on his will. The out-group suffers more than the in-group, and God is responsible for this imbalance. Further, God assigns suffering based on ethnic divisions, and is always a member of the in-group, which suffers less.

Jones supports this theory with a correlate for divine racism, evidence for the ethnic nature of human suffering. First, ethnic suffering is unevenly distributed. Some suffer more than others. Secondly, ethnic suffering takes a negative quality. There is no inherent redeeming value in suffering via genocide and ethnic cleansing, whereas certain intentional self-sacrifice such as asceticism and fasting are examples of positive suffering meant to bring about a greater appreciation of life. Third, ethnic suffering is characterized by an insurmountable enormity such that most members of a particular out-group are suffering, and that such suffering is often inflicted to the point of death or to the result of permanently reducing life expectancy. This is important because it eliminates many explanations for suffering in various theodicies. For example, such terminal suffering cannot be pedagogical, allowing us to learn from our mistakes.³

If sin and the resulting suffering are eternal, then redemption or repentance are impossible. Finally, ethnic suffering is non-catastrophic, which means it isn't sharp and immediate and indiscriminate like the suffering brought on by natural disasters, but is extended across historical periods, striking generation after generation within the same group. This was the irony of the suffering exposed by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Katrina didn't cause the suffering of New Orleans poor black inner city population. It simply exposed generations of suffering that had become invisible, whether by design or by ignorance, to most of the world, but which has been present since the founding of our nation. As then FEMA Director Michael Brown said, "We're seeing people we didn't know existed." This isn't an indictment on Michael Brown, just a recognition of the prophetic truth of his statement. The oppressed become invisible in our society of class and economic apartheid, like the elephant in the room. So large a problem, so pervasive, impossible to miss, equally impossible to eliminate because it is so utterly invisible or accepted. We are a nation with its eyes wide shut.

Given this condition of human suffering in the world, God cannot be both benevolent and involved. A benevolent God would not allow such suffering and oppression. Of course, the idea of creation being founded on malevolence is equally unacceptable. We aren't *really* trying to determine whether or not God is a white racist. Rather, we are questioning the theologies that have institutionalized racism since the beginning of recorded history.

Other interpretations of scripture try to resolve this paradox—this good God/bad God dichotomy—by blaming humanity for evil from the very beginning. The doctrine of original sin is the result of the need to justify God's anger with God's love, but it maintains God's omnipotence and omniscience at our expense. The doctrine of original sin lays the foundation for divine racism and ethnic suffering. God is in the *in*-group, and lays blame on the first humans for their moral weakness. And so the story becomes one of transgression and salvation and a history of in-groups and out-groups and inequality and eternal damnation. Over time, this just becomes the way things are, the status quo, non-catastrophic. The result is acceptance of unjust

suffering—what Jones calls quietism. The acceptance of one's own suffering and that of others as inevitable, unavoidable, and even deserved, with no possibility for escape.⁴

You may know this theme of unjust suffering and violence perpetuated by traditional orthodoxies from Rebecca Parker's and Rita Nakashima Brock's book *Proverbs of Ashes*. Theirs is primarily a feminist rejection of the status quo, whereas William Jones's calls for a reevaluation of black theology. Their purposes are identical in rejecting the theological frameworks that fossilize submission and acceptance of imposed suffering and violence. Jones says the primary distinction between quietism and its opposite is analogous to conformity as opposed to rebellion relative to the status quo. He ultimately calls for rebellion.

Parker, now President of the Unitarian Universalist Star King School for the Ministry, reflects on hers and a colleague's struggle with the United Methodist church she once served as minister:

How could we in good conscience continue to serve a church whose fundamental teachings contributed to the very violence we were seeking to prevent? At the same time how could we walk away from the sanctuary, from the work of tending sacred ground, and providing ordinary places in the world that are doorways into divine presence, transcendent mercy, healing, and hope? This was our chosen work, but clearly it demanded much more of us than repeating the old words and rituals unexamined.⁵

If we cannot accept an angry God and cannot accept the blame of original sin, and its resulting unexamined, justified oppression, then we are left with dwindling choices on how to handle suffering.

Another possibility is a hands-off deity who may have lovingly created the universe in which we live, but who has no present control over our lives. This is not a particularly popular God either. This deadbeat Dad, this absent father model, solves only one problem, which is the outright malevolence of God. But it raises other questions that complicate God's existence and role. Either God is indifferent, just as humans are often indifferent, which in the face of preventable suffering can be interpreted as more insidious than just being mean; or God is *unable* to intervene, just as humans are unable to intervene in much of what we create, meaning that God is fallible and not omniscient. If God is impotent to respond to human suffering, then human cries for redemption and salvation will go unanswered. This isn't an option for believers in a sentient God. It gives them a way to handle suffering, but not to break free from it. They must then accept their plight. The other option is that an anthropomorphic, sentient, omniscient, and intervening God simply does not exist.

This is the path that Jones takes. He calls on African Americans to reject these other oppressing theologies in favor of a humanocentric theology or secular humanist approach. This is an extreme departure from traditional black theologies, and he received much criticism for this approach despite the recognition of the importance of his work. Parker and Nakashima Brock also call for the rejection of traditional theological frameworks and strip God of any anthropomorphism, but they don't throw out God altogether. For them, God is love. Like Jones they affirm that we are active agents in our own salvation. We cannot simply accept suffering, but must rebel against the status quo that perpetuates oppression.

Parker and Nakashima Brock close their book with these words:

This is God with us:

Quiet moments of mutual discovery by friends sharing coffee on a sunlit
afternoon,
tears appearing on a frozen face,
a community meeting that resists violence,
an embrace that holds the other through the terrors of the night,
a sheltering moon watching over an unblessed child,
an old woman keeping faded photographs on a mirror,
a dark ocean shimmering with diamonds.

Let us say that life shows us the face of God only in fleeting glimpses, by the light of
night fires, in dancing shadows, in departing ghosts, and in recollections of steady love.

Let us say this is enough.⁶

So, now that we have recognized and harnessed the elephant, how do we tame it? How do
we take our message of love into the world effectively so that more people are free from the
religious chains that bind them? We have learned that guilt and shame will not work. We need to
take charge of our own salvation. We do this in three ways: Learning, loving, and doing.

In her 1999 presentation, Thandeka said “read” (learning), “empathize” (loving), and
“organize” (doing). She rejected the myth that UUs comprise the economic elite of this country.
We do not. And she said of Unitarian Universalist congregations: “I believe that we have the
power to transform America because of who we are: We are Middle-America. Transform this
group and you transform the country because we are the majority. All we need is the moral
courage to practice what we preach. And we will generate this moral courage through love.”⁷

These are prophetic words indeed. Thandeka spoke them in 1999, but in the 20th century,
in a pre-9/11 world, pre-Katrina America. These early years of the 21st century have been
dubbed a post-9/11 world and a now a post-Katrina America. The ugly, invisible secrets of the
most powerful nation on the globe are exposed, economic and cultural apartheid wrapped in the
guise of ethnic suffering and divine racism. The unspoken questions of divine racism and ethnic
suffering are on the table. God is no more a white racist than any of us are. We need to tear down
the religious scaffolding that holds divine racism firmly in place. Let us have the moral courage
to practice what we preach. Learn, love, and act. Change the status quo. This is the moral
imperative of our generation. This is our moment of grace and we must respond.

1. Thandeka, “Why Anti-Racism Will Fail” Presentation at the Unitarian Universalist
Association General Assembly, Salt Lake City Utah, June 1999.
[<http://www.uua.org/ga/ga99/238thandeka.html>]
2. Mark Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers In a White Denomination*, Boston, Beacon Press,
1980.
3. William Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* Boston, Beacon Press, 1998, 2nd ed. pp21-22.
4. Jones, p 44.
5. Rebecca Parker & Rita Nakashima-Brock, *Proverbs of Ashes*, Boston, Beacon Press,
2002, p. 20.
6. Parker & Nakashima-Brock, p. 252

7. Thandeka, "Why Anti Racism Will Fail."

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