

Western Images of Others and Otherness

WESTERN IMAGES OF OTHERS AND OTHERNESS

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The Mending Wall

Before I build a wall I'd ask to know
What was I walling in or walling out
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.

Robert Frost

“We would rather have our daughter marry a non-Christian white than a Christian non-white.” These were the words of white American evangelical parents who had grown up in the church. How can such sinful attitudes persist after generations of Christian teaching—or are they sinful? And why does ‘race’ matter when it comes to marriage if two persons love one another?

Constructing Identities

Ethnicity has something to do with who we are, but who are we? In large measure we are who our society says we are. We all live in communities made up of different kinds of people: women and men, tall and short, young and old, dark and light skinned, long and short nosed, poor and rich. Some of these differences are innate, others acquired. Most we ignore or note only in passing. Others we highlight to organize our society. It is these that our society uses as markers to give us our identities as persons in social contexts. They define who we are and how we should behave. They also set us apart from ‘others,’ and shape how we see and relate to them. In other words, our identities as persons and as groups of people, and the expected relationships between us, are social constructs.

Societies generally take note of social variables, such as wealth and political views in creating identities and categories. They also take note of biological variables, such as gender, biological features such as color, and age as markers. In the case of biology, it is not the biological realities that determine the social categories we use to think and live with, but the biological markers our society takes note of, and the categories it creates on the basis of these that give people their identities.

Social categories are built by establishing oppositions—by showing the differences between “us” and “others”. Each society and each age recreates its “others” in order to define itself. Edward Said notes,

Far from a static thing then, identity of self or of “other” is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies (1995, 332).

For the most part it is those who have the power to define the categories and impose these on a society as a whole that define themselves as more ‘human,’ ‘advanced,’ and ‘superior.’ Over time, they people come to see these categories as innately real because these shape and explain their collective experiences. The excluded and oppressed have their own views of who they are, but these views are generally ignored by the dominant community.

One of our deepest socio-psychological identities is ethnicity—the feeling that we are part of a group because we are the ‘same kind’ of people. This consciousness of ‘kind’ is based on the belief that we share the same unalterable characteristics. Often these are thought to be “based on a myth of collective ancestry, which usually carries with it traits believed to be innate (Horowitz 1985, k 52). In other words, we share the same ‘blood.’ Often ethnicity is associated with language, religion and particular cultural practices which form a common heritage. One or

more of these markers may serve as sources of ethnic divisiveness that leads to disdain, discrimination, accusations of inferior ancestry, and violence between ethnic groups.

Racism is an extreme form of ethnocentrism, which is particularly oppressive. George Fredrickson writes,

It originates from a mind set that regards “them” as different from “us” in ways that are permanent and unbridgeable. This sense of difference provides a motive or rationale for using our power advantage to treat the ethnoracial Other in ways that we would regard as cruel or unjust if applied to members of our own group (2002, 9).

One of the roots of ethnic hostilities and racism is a people’s perception of the Others they encounter in life. Ethnocentrism and racism involve much more than perceptions of Others. They are institutionalized in social systems and encoded in cultural systems. An analysis of perceptions of Others can open the door to study the complex structures that make up ethnocentrism and racism. In this chapter we will draw on Bernard McGrane (1989), and look at some of the historical forces that have shaped how Europeans and North Americans have viewed Others over the past few centuries, and how these perceptions have led to the racism that now plagues our societies. We will then examine ways to change our perceptions of Others to build bridges of understanding and love between us.

European Encounters with Others and Otherness

Ethnocentrism and racism have to do, in part, with our perceptions of some people as being different from ourselves. They are Others—not “our kind of people.” Most of our perceptions and stereotypes of Others are taught us by our societies and families, but we internalize and make them our own. We may hide our views of Others by civility and cordiality. But when tensions arise, they will surface.

People have always had stereotypes of their Others. In the sixteenth century Sebastian Münster described the Scotch as faithful and vengeful; the Jews prudent but envious; the Persians steadfast but disloyal, the Egyptians stable and crafty; the Greeks wise but deceitful; and the Spaniards drunken, violent and sophisticated. In 1527 Henry Agrippa declared, “In singing also the Italians bleat, the Spaniards Whine, the Germans Howl, and the French Quaver (Harris 1968, 399-400).”

Perceptions of Others are shaped over time. To understand racism in the West today, we need to see the historical events leading up to the views we have of other peoples. During the High Middle Ages educated Europeans saw foreigners in two ways. One was ‘monsters.’ North Europeans had many stories of humanoids who lived in the forests and prairies, and were embodiments of evil forces (Jeffrey 1980). They spoke of *satyr* (half human-half goat), *pyrs* (hairy woodmen), water-sprites, the Old Norse *Æviðr*, the Scandinavian *bergrisar*, trolls living under bridges, and giants in mountain castles. After the coming of Christianity, these monsters were seen as the “descendants of Cain.” The second category was ‘infidels’ (McGrane 1989) Muslim armies had taken Palestine, and were in Spain and attacking Vienna. They were clearly humans, but they had heard the Gospel and rejected it. Therefore, they had to be driven back and killed. The result was, in part, the crusades.

The Age of Exploration

European perceptions of the world changed radically at the end of the fifteenth century. Explorers, seeking new routes to the spices of India, discovered unknown lands and strange people not found on their maps. The age was one of exploration, and of redrawing of physical

and mental maps to include hitherto unknown lands and peoples.

Europe's encounter with Others during the Age of Exploration raised profound questions. Who were these Others? Were they humans? Did they have souls that needed to be saved? Could they be enslaved and killed, or was this murder? The encounter with new peoples raised questions not only of geography but also of sociology, economics, politics and theology.

The western commercial world saw the newly discovered Others as a source of goods and labor—of gold and slaves. European exploration was not random. The explorers were looking *for* something: namely spices, gold and labor. But what right did the Europeans have to enslave other peoples? Many argued that these Others were like children. Therefore the Europeans were justified in their colonial expansion in which they acted as parents, educating and managing the natives' wealth for the natives' own good.

The Christian response was that these were truly humans. If so, how should Christians relate to them? Were they children of Adam and Eve? If so, they needed salvation. If not, they might be humans untouched by the fall. The church concluded that these people were sinners in need of salvation, and the descendants of Adam and Eve. They were not Christian heretics who distorted the Gospel, nor Muslim infidels who rejected it. They had not heard the Gospel. They were 'pagans' and 'heathens,' who were potential Christians. The result was the birth of the modern mission movement, first by the Catholics and later by the Protestants.

Scientists took a different view of these Others. Science was becoming increasingly secular. The earth of the fifteenth century was seen as an island (Orbis Terrarum), made up of Europe, Asia and Africa, with the Holy City of Jerusalem in the center and God in control. This sacred space was surrounded by the dark, inhuman, evil void of the deep waters. Crossing the

seas and discovering new lands radically changed how Europeans viewed the earth. Now, for the first time, the world was seen as a uniform, continuous, secular space covered by continents and oceans. In this new world, Others were no longer 'fallen' and in need of redemption. They were secular humans who could be compared with other humans. In these comparisons they were seen as "barbarians," and "savages." It was western explorers who named and studied others and their lands.

Age of Enlightenment:

The definition of the 'Others' changed with the coming of the Enlightenment. The shift is epitomized in the experiences of Robinson Crusoe, the leading character in Rudyard Kipling's novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (19###). Crusoe was a quintessential Enlightenment man—solitary individual, Cartesian rationalist, and technological inventor (McGrane 1989, 44). After almost eighteen years alone on an island, he came across charred human bones on a beach. "Cannibals!" he thought. From the depth of his European body and soul he vomits. His initial reaction was that these were "beasts," "savages," and "evil"—a response that fit the Age of Exploration. By contrast, he was "human," and "good."

Crusoe decides to slaughter all the savages he can, but, on further reflection, he undergoes a worldview shift. He writes,

What authority or call had I to pretend to be judge and executioner upon these men as criminals, whom Heaven had thought fit for so many ages to suffer unpunished to go on; It is certain these people do not commit this as a crime; it is not against their own consciences reproving or their light reproaching them (Defoe 1961, 168).

Crusoe decides that it is wrong for him to judge other people by *his* standards. They must be judged in the light of *their own* morality and culture. But it is clear that his culture is more

advanced, and these people need to be taught true morality.

When Crusoe rescues one of the cannibals, he exercises the sovereign right of the Explorer and names him—he is “Friday,” and he will address Crusoe as “Master.” Thereby Crusoe transforms the stranger from a nameless *savage* who exists beyond the boundaries of humanity and civilization, into Friday, a *primitive human being* who is a subordinate member in Crusoe’s world. Crusoe teaches Friday English, and gives him a place to live half way between Crusoe’s house and the forest inhabited by beasts and cannibals. Friday is awestruck by Crusoe’s gun and wants to worship it. Crusoe teaches him that it is not miraculous, and can be explained in natural terms.

In their daily encounters, Crusoe is increasingly forced to recognize Friday’s full humanity. How, then, can Crusoe account for the differences between them? His answer is that Friday is unenlightened, therefore naked, primitive and non-Christian, while he is Enlightened, clothed and Christian. But Friday can be taught, and saved through Crusoe’s efforts. Typical of the enlightenment understanding, there is no mention of what Friday thought of Crusoe, or of Crusoe’s attempts to ‘civilize’ him.

Crusoe illustrates the transition to the world of the Enlightenment. Three fundamental shifts marked this change in the popular and scientific worlds. First, Others were no longer ‘savages,’ but ‘unenlightened,’ and evil was no longer ‘sin,’ it was ignorance. The earlier distinction between refined-Christian versus idolatrous-savage was replaced by the *civilized-European* versus the *superstitious-ignorant-primitive*.

Second, in time the others became ‘aboriginals.’ They represented humans who had not evolved as those who lived in the West. These Others still lived in the ‘stone age.’ They were

living fossils. But if these others are now like European ancestors once were, they help modern people understand their own story. Joseph Conrad captures this view in his description of Africa.

We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. . . . But suddenly as we struggled around a bend, there would be a glimpse of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands, clapping, of feet stomping, of bodies swaying. . . . It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. . . . They howled and leaped . . . but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship (1950, 105).

Modern white people of the time saw the world as a great museum. In the Amazon they saw their remotest ancestors; in New Guinea, they saw stage two, and so on. The people of the world reveal *their* history, and the only audience that can understand the play is, of course, “them.” They had the benefit of hindsight: they know how the story ends, they *are* how the story ends. It was clear to scientists that western civilization was the most evolved of all cultures. In this light, the colonial venture was not oppressive. It was the benevolent efforts of enlightened people to help the Others join them in their full humanity.

But there remained in the minds of some a gnawing doubt. Was it possible that savages were Nobel Savages who were happier than modern humans? Herman Melville captured this doubt in his description of the encounter of a French admiral and a native king.

The admiral came forward with uncovered head and extended one hand, while the old king saluted him by a stately flourish of his weapon. The next moment they stood side by side, these two extremes of the social scale—the polished Frenchman, and the poor tattooed savage. . . . At what an immeasurable distance, thought I, are these two beings removed from each other! In the one is shown the result of long centuries of progressive refinement, which have gradually converted the mere creature into the semblance of all that is elevated and grand; while the other, after the lapse of the same period, has not advanced one step in the career of improvement. “Yet after all,” quoth I to myself, “insensible as he is to a thousand wants, and removed from harassing cares, may not the savage be the happier man of the two?” (1974, 33).

The third shift was that the Others became Children. They could be enlightened through education by western parents and teachers. This justified the colonization of the world to bring light to those trapped in darkness and ignorance.

At the heart of the Enlightenment was the birth of modern science, which was assumed by most modern people to provide objective and true knowledge. Its definitions of things had an aura of reality and truthfulness about them that traditional taxonomies did not. It told people how things ‘really are.’

The triumph of science in the natural fields opened the door for the scientific study of humans. At the beginning of the Enlightenment Locke declared “all men are created equal.” However, Marvin Harris writes,

On the crest of reaction to the French Revolution, educated opinion moved steadily to an opposite extreme: by the middle of the nineteenth century no “truth” had become more “self-evident” than that all men were created *unequal* (1968, 80).

In the nineteenth century the study of humans emerged as a science. As Eloise Meneses (chapter #), and #### #### (chapter #) show, this took the form of racial determinism.

Ethnocentrism is as old as humanity. It is a system of prejudice and discrimination against people who are ethnically Other. Now the study of race became a central object of scientific study. People were not humans to be known personally. They were objects to be counted, analyzed and reduced to general categories, laws and theories. They were lumped into anonymous collectives in which particularities were eliminated by definition, and broad generalizations formulated. The result was the theory of racial determinism and modern scientific racism.

To define a category scientists look for essential, intrinsic characteristics that do not

change and are not shaped by history or culture. A thing is *what it is*. A rose is a rose because it *is* a rose—you cannot change its essential nature. The result is inalienable, unchanging categories. Because science was assumed to be positive knowledge and true, its definitions of things had an aura of reality and truthfulness about them that folk taxonomies did not. It was not the scientist who created the categories. The categories existed in nature and needed to be discovered. Science “tells” us how things “really are.”

Scientists began to classify and order the newly discovered peoples of the world. To do so they looked for material characteristics which could be measured and quantified. The most visible differences between humans were physical features, so this led to a focus on race. Scientists selected only a few physical characteristics to note, and treats the others as surface and not essential or worth studying. For example, phrenology studied the size and shape of the skull to measure the size of brains, and created the cephalic index, the ratio of head length to breath, which could be precisely measured

Biological groups were equated with geographic regions. People were labeled Africans, Indians and Chinese, despite great ethnic variations in these geographic territories. Furthermore, psychological and sociocultural differences, as dependent variables, were attributed to biological races which were seen as hereditary and unalterable. In other words, culture and cultural traits such as habits of dress and foods were in the “blood”. It was assumed that, “All Africans are exotic, sensuous, impulsive,” “All Chinese are mysterious and inscrutable,” and “All whites are rational, orderly, moral and industrious.” The differences between societies, cultures and personalities of people were seen as variations in a people’s race which could not be changed. The associations were unquestioned. Harris asks, “How can one disprove the assertion that

Gypsies keep on the move because they have a ‘wanderlust’ in their ‘blood’? Or that American Negroes succeed as musicians because they have an ‘instinct for rhythm’? (1964, 812). But classifications create social realities. People were taught to act the way those of their race were expected to behave. To be a white man was to do as white men do. Said notes, “One became a White Man because one *was* a White Man (1995, 227).”

Science divided races into well defined categories. All members in a category were considered to be the same. In defining human races, this meant defining one race over against others, often on the basis of minor differences. Moreover, everyone was assigned to one race or another, and branded by the characteristics of that category. There was no way a person could alter his or her race, or belong to two races at the same time. Those that did not fit were treated as ‘exceptions,’ which solved the case without challenging the categories themselves. “Yes, there are brilliant Blacks,” but that only shows that most are dumb. The result was racial stereotyping.

The second task of science was to order categories into larger domains. At first different races were thought to have evolved from different primates,¹ but by the late nineteenth century the unity of the human species was accepted. The question then was, how do these races relate to one another? To put something into a domain is to show how it is like and different from all others in the domain. In defining human races, this meant defining one over against the other, often on the basis of minor differences

Science organized races, like it did all animal species, in terms of a hierarchy. Rudyard

¹ In 1863 the Anthropological Society of London split from the Ethnological Society over the questions of slavery and whether humans were of one or more than one species. James Hunt, a leader in the former, sought to prove that Africans were of a different species than Europeans, and that they differed mentally and morally even more than physically from Europeans (Reining 1970, 4-5).

Kipling captures this view of life. “Mule, horse, elephant, or bullock, he obeys his driver, and the driver his sergeant, and the sergeant his lieutenant, and the lieutenant his captain, and the captain his major, and the major his colonel, and the colonel his brigadier commanding three regiments, and the brigadier his general, who obeys the Viceroy, who is the servant of the Empress” (quoted in Said 1995, 45). With regard to race, the categories were ranked along a hierarchy from inferior to superior, from dark to light skin, from curly to straight hair, from much to little body hair. This was used to justify conquest, colonialism and slavery. The inferiors must be treated as inferiors. In colonialism this led to the standard rationalizations:

[T]he natives are lazy; they do not respond like civilized men to the offer of wages; they need to be taught the virtues of civilized forms of labor by means other than those appropriate to civilized man. They must be forced to work by limiting their tribal lands, by imposing head taxes, and by compulsory contracts. Unlike civilized man, the “inferior” races suffer moral and spiritual ills if they are educated beyond the primary level. . . . Being more childlike than Europeans, it is dangerous for natives to have free access to alcoholic drinks. . . . Such people, if given a chance, prefer to walk rather than to ride, they like to sleep on the cold ground rather than on warm beds; they work in the rain without feeling wet, work in the sun without feeling hot, and carry loads on their heads without getting tired. Life is not so dear in these people as to Europeans; when their children die, they are not so deeply disturbed and when they themselves suffer injury, it does not hurt as much as it does in the civilized man (Harris 1964, 135).

If certain races are inferior, some argued, they can be perfected and made potentially equal to the higher races. Give enough time and teaching, the inferior races can be civilized and come to resemble their European conquerors. This led to notions of the “White Man’s burden.” As Harris notes, “the more childlike and savage the ‘inferior’ races, the more they were regarded as needing the help of the civilized branches of humanity (1964, 97).” Many who argued against slavery in the U.S. did so not on the basis of the equality of all humans, but on the humanitarian argument that the inferior should be helped, not enslaved, by the superior. Christians like Count

J. A. De Gobineau argued that people from other races could be converted because Christianity appeals to the lowly and simple, and can be understood and accepted by the lowest types of humans. But, he argued, this does not mean that in other matters they are equal to Europeans.

Classifications create social realities, and it is the powerful who create the classifications. They do not let others define themselves. The subordinates must fit into the categories created by the powerful.² Moreover, the powerful use defining characteristics that favor themselves over the others. It was Whites who defined and named themselves, and named others 'non-whites' and 'colored'. Whites studied nonwhites, not the other way around. Because whites were doing the studying, they assigned what they saw as their characteristics to the highest rank. Euro-Americans were the normal human, the standard against which the others are measured. They were Occidental, civilized, law abiding. The opposite characteristics were assigned to their Others. Others were Oriental, uncivilized, primitive and ruled by passions, not reason. In doing so, Whites defined themselves over against their Others. The Others were what they were not, and so showed them what they were. Said writes,

[T]he development and maintenance of every culture requires the existence of another different and competing *alter ego*. The construction of identity—for identity, whether Orient or Occident . . . while obviously a repository of distinct collective experiences, *is* finally a construction—involves establishing opposites and “others” whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from “us” (1995, 332).

These classifications reinforced the sense of the otherness of the Others, particularly since that

² The powerless have their own classifications and definitions of themselves, but in public life they must live with the definitions of themselves given them by the dominant community. They live with an identity tension of who they really are. The dominant community has no such crisis. Its members are secure and comfortable in their identity. In fact, they often see no problem with racism, and assume that because it is no problem it simply is, and they are doing well by showing kindness to Others.

otherness was defined in terms of what were seen as essential unchangeable characteristics, and overlooked similarities and commonalities between peoples.

Scholarly classification helped create a particularly virulent type of racism. What counts in racism is not so much about what people are or think, but what they are shaped to be and to think. Social identities are not merely about mental self-images. They are social constructs based on contests involving concrete political issues such as immigration laws, legislation of personal conduct, legitimization of violence, the content of education, and the direction of foreign policy. In Europe the result was colonialism in which Others were ruled in order to improve their lot in life by making them more like White Euro-Americans. The West defined all Others, reconstructed their histories, and determined how they should progress. In the end, two-thirds of the world was ruled by a few European countries. Said notes, “The inequality of races and the necessary domination of the many by the few because this is the law of nature—was assumed by the end of the 19th century (1995, 133).”

In the end such classifications and hierarchy dehumanize Others—they are objects to be studied and controlled, not humans to relate to. George Orwell writes,

When you walk through a town like this—two hundred thousand inhabitants, of whom at least twenty thousand own literally nothing except the rags they stand up in—when you see how the people live, and still more, how easily they die, it is difficult to believe that you’re walking among human beings. All colonial empires are in reality founded upon that fact. The people have brown faces—besides they have so many of them! Are they really the same flesh as yourself? Do they even have names? Or are they merely a kind of undifferentiated brown stuff, about as individual as bees or coral insects? They arise out of the earth, they sweat and starve for a few years, and then they sink back into the nameless mounds of the graveyard and nobody notices that they are gone. And even the graves themselves soon fade back into the soul (1954, 251).\

Regarding the treatment of these ‘others,’ some scientists argued that it was not the responsibility of science the judge. In 1866, speaking of the Queensland hunts in which aboriginals were

killed, the *Practical Magazine of Anthropology* stated, “Anthropological science, like all sciences, is passionless on the point, but a better knowledge of its deductions and principles would have instilled some feeling of prudence and pity into the murderers, who seem to revel in the unnatural process of extinction (Reining 1970, 5).”

The Enlightenment deeply influenced western Christians whites. In the West it justified segregated churches and slavery. It supported the mission movement, and saw whites as uniquely called to propagate Christianity and Civilization around the world (Taber 1991). Missionaries sacrificed their lives to bring the Gospel to people around the world, but many took for granted the racial superiority of whites. Henry Venn, a leading missionary to India, wrote of missionaries being of “another and superior race than his converts” (Taber 1991, 62). Christians argued that the “curse of Ham” (Gen 9:18-27) applied to black peoples, supposedly the descendants of Ham.

All this must be said, but as Lamin Sanneh (1993) points out, many of the missionaries were concerned with communicating the Gospel to other peoples. They lived with the people and often defended them against oppression by business and government. Moreover, by translating the Bible into native languages, communicating to them a universal gospel, and baptizing the converts into the global church, the missionaries dignified the people, and helped them more than other westerners to preserve their cultural identities.

The Age of Post-Enlightenment (1930 –)

The Enlightenment reached its peak at the end of the nineteenth century. Two world wars, and the rise of anti-colonial and nativistic movements began to call the enlightenment project into question. Moreover, prolonged encounter with people in other cultures led Westerners, in their encounters with Others, to increasingly see them as fully human, and their

cultures as having much worth. This was true of Crusoe who came to see Friday increasingly as a human.

To acknowledge the full humanity of other peoples raised new questions. “How could the Others be equal to us and yet remain Other?” Enlightenment scholars studied people from their scientific point of view. Now they tried to see the world through the eyes of the people they were studying. The Others now became *natives*, who had their own cultures with their own internal logics and coherence. Others are not now primitive. They are fully rational beings having their own autonomous cultures. The word ‘civilization’ associated with a hierarchical view of peoples was rejected in favor of ‘culture’ in which all are different but equal. ‘Culture’ asserts that the Other is fully human and contemporary, not a fossil ancestor. Cultures were seen as unique and autonomous. Each is seen as discrete, bounded and self-contained, and functions to maintain a harmonious society. Cultures were also seen as morally neutral. People in one culture should not judge other cultures. To do so is ethnocentric and imperialistic.

This post-Enlightenment view of Others is an important corrective to the arrogance and oppressions of the past, but it leaves Others as simply ‘Others.’ There is an insurmountable wall between Us and Them. In a world of diversity, the question is how can we build a world of harmony, justice and love. The underlying notion that race is natural, stable and inherent is false. Identities are not natural and stable, but constructed and even invented. But to say that human realities are constantly being made and unmade is unsettling and leads to fear. Reactions to this fear lead to patriotism, xenophobia and chauvinism. Said asks,

Can one divide human reality, as human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether

there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into “us” . . . and “they.” (1995, 45).

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF OTHERS

Christians must provide an answer to this question, or the Gospel becomes the Gospel for only a few—the powerful. They must address the question of human differences, and the sin of racism in the church. It is clear that in viewing others, they have been influenced more by their world than by the Word. They need to return to a biblical view of ‘others’ to chart a new way for people from different ethnic communities to relate to one another. They cannot view the Other as Savage, or embrace the Enlightenment views of the Other as Primitive and Ancestor, although that is their natural reaction the first time we truly relate to people who are very different from ourselves. Nor can they accept the post-modern view of others as totally and inscrutably Other. How then should they view Others?

The Oneness of Humanity

First, Christians must affirm the common humanity with all people. The Scriptures lead to a startling conclusion: *at the deepest level of identity as humans there are no others—there are only us*. On the surface humans are males and females, blacks, browns and whites, rich and poor, old and young, but beneath this they are one humanity. This oneness of humanity is declared in the creation account (Gen 1:26), and affirmed by the universalism implicit in the Old Testament (Gen. 12, Ps. 67, 72:17, 96:3, 148:11-13, Is. 11:10, 19:23-25, 42:6, 45:22, 49:22, 52:15, 56:7, 60:3, 65:1, 66:18, Jer. 4:2, 31:11, 33:9, Zec. 8:13, 9:10, Micah 4:1-2, Haggai 2:7, Joel 3:2). In Christ and in the New Testament the implications of this common humanity are worked out more

fully. When a Pharisee asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”—in other words, who is one of us, Jesus turned the question on its head and asked, “If your Other, a Samaritan, is a neighbor to your brother, a suffering Jew, who are you to the Samaritan?” The Pharisee was forced to admit either that he was indeed a neighbor to the Samaritan, or that he had cut himself off from his fellow Jew. Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy,’ but I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’” (Matt. 54:43-44 NRSV). War demands that people hate their enemies and brand them as Other. Jesus says our enemies are us, therefore we must love them.

In affirming the oneness of humanity Christians must not deny the great difficulty in understanding people in other cultures. It is easy to say that they love them when they have few deep relationships with them. Far too often people claim to know what others are thinking and feeling, when, in fact, they are totally wrong. The more people study cultural differences, the more they realize how difficult it is to see others as humans like themselves, and to build deep inter-ethnic relationships of mutuality and love.

The Oneness of Christians

Scripture leads to a second conclusion: *in the church all are members of one new people*. In Christ God’s Kingdom came to earth (Matt. 4:17-25). A new age is at hand. The church is the sign and manifestation of that Kingdom, and all who follow Jesus as their Lord become members of a new people. John Stott writes, “For the sake of the glory of God and the evangelization of the world, nothing is more important than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, God’s new society (1979,10).

The importance of the unity of and fellowship within the church is seen in Christ's high priestly prayer John

For Paul, unity and living as fellow citizens is the way the church demonstrates being God's work in the world. In Ephesians Paul describes the hostilities that divide humans (2:11-12), shows how Christ brought those hostilities to an end (2:13-18), and argues that Christians united in Christ are God's object lesson to the world (2:19-22). "Ephesians sees the church as the community in which the deepest hostility between men was healed. . . . When the church views herself in the light of Eph. 2:11-22 then it is impossible for her to be conformed to the divisions which exist in society. It is her nature to be the place where divisions are healed" (Rader 1978, 253, 255)." In Colossians . .

During this time when the Kingdom of God has come but not in its fullness, Christians continue to live in the kingdoms of this world, but their identities in the world (the old *aeon*) these are relativized because they are passing away. The Christian's new identity is as a member in the family of Christ. This identity is eternal, and takes precedence over all earthly identities.

Peter learned this lesson when he went to the house of Cornelius. His amazement at what was taking place can be detected in his words in the house of Cornelius, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality (Acts 10:34)." The unity of the church is not a by-product of the Good News, it is an essential part of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul writes, "[Christ] tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. . . . Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two

groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everyone (Eph. 2:14-15 Peterson 1993, 404). It should come as no surprise that in the churches Paul planted, Jews, Greeks, barbarians, Tracians, Egyptians and Romans were able to feel at home. This mutual acceptance of Jews and Gentiles in the church was itself a testimony to the world of the transforming power of the Gospel. In Christ Christians *are* one body (Eph. 4:4). If they are not part of the body, they are not a part of Christ. This unity of a shared new life in Christ bridges the human distinctions of ethnicity (Gal 2:11-21), class (1 Cor 10:11) and gender (Gal 3:28, Acts 2:44f, 4:32).

- Jesus on the unity of the body
- Paul in Corinth, and in Ephesus, and Colosse
- Peter

How people see others in large measure shapes how they relate to them. Christians need to model in their relationship to others the awareness of their oneness as humans and their oneness as Christians.

Tearing Down Race Walls

If races and racism are socially constructed, and they are, they can be deconstructed. To do so, however, is not easy. Christians must deal with both social and personal constructs. To deal with one or the other is not enough. Here we will look primarily at our personal views of races and racism because it is a starting point, but we must also deal with sociocultural constructs of racism if we are ever to see walls torn down, and reconciliation and love between the people of the world.

As persons we have different social identities. We are daughters and sons, husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, teachers and students, pastors and parishioners, merchants and customers, Americans, Chinese, Nigerians and Brazilians, and Anglo Americans, Hispanics, African Americans and Korean Americans. We activate each identity in the appropriate social context. We do not act as husband or wife to students in class, or teachers to presidents.

At a deeper level we prioritize these social identities. When two conflict, we choose one at the expense of the other. For example, when Christian parents said they would rather have their child marry a non-Christian White than a Christian African American, they were saying that their ethnicity was deeper than their Christian beliefs.

For the most part, we give high priority in our everyday lives to our primary reference group—to those who are ‘our kind of people’. These are people with whom we associate daily. On a higher level, people in traditional societies identify themselves with their ethnic community—those believed to share a common ancestry and ‘blood,’ and set themselves off from other ethnic groups. In modernity, people increasingly identify themselves at a deep level with their nation, and are willing to kill and die for it. As Christians we need to realize that at the deepest level of our identity we are one with all humans in our common humanity, and one with all Christians in the one body of Christ. In other words, our oneness with other Christians is deeper than the identities that divide us on earth, such as ethnicity (Jew or Gentile), class (slave or free), and gender (male or female), which are not eternal. These identities are part of this passing age. Our new ethnicity as children of God is eternal. In the church, at least, we should manifest this eternal reality, and not be captive to our temporary worldly identities. Similarly, in reaching out to the lost, we must meet them as the deepest level of our identities—our common

humanity.

How can we learn to see and live with our Christian siblings as one? We cannot expect new believers to put their new identity in Christ at the deepest level of their hierarchy of identities. This will not simply happen. It must be an intentional part of all discipling processes. And it must be modeled by those who are mature in faith. Similarly, new Christians must be led to deal with their racism, for it is sin. It divides the body of Christ, and it closes the door to effective witness to nonbelievers.

But we must do more than tear down the walls that divide us so deeply. We need to celebrate our oneness and build relationships of unity and love. If our deepest identities are ethnic, cultural and national, we can gather on the surface for worship, fellowship and mission, but we know that when things go bad, the underlying differences will divide us and we will war against one another. If, on the other hand, we are one at the deepest levels of our identities, we can celebrate ethnic, cultural and gender differences, knowing that when problems arise we will be pulled even more together as a body. Unity in the body of Christ does not rest in uniformity, but on our common 'blood'. We now are members of one family, and that identity cannot be taken from us, no matter how much we disagree or quarrel.

Unity in the church that breaks down walls of ethnicity, gender and class is a sign, not a fruit, of the Kingdom of God now invading the earth. It takes place wherever Christ is Lord of our lives. As Karl Barth said, "[The Church] exists . . . to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to [the world's] own manner and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise." Philip Yancey adds, "A society that welcomes people of all races and social classes, that is characterized by love and not polarization, that cares most for its weakest members, that

stands for justice and righteousness in a world enamored with selfishness and decadence, a society in which members compete for the privilege of serving one another—this is what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God (1995, 253).” As Christians, we must learn how to live out this reality in our everyday lives in our fallen world. But in doing so we show to the world the essence of the Gospel, that differences based on race, class or ethnicity can be celebrated because beneath them we are one in Christ.

Steps: – start meeting and learning to know people of other ethnic groups. What do you talk about? Ask them about themselves. You want to know and they love to tell you about yourself. Don’t tell about yourself until asked. Share with humility.

Go to gatherings where people of all ethnic groups are welcome.

= invite preachers and singers to your church

- get involved in mission in your neighborhood and around the world.

From John Howard Yoder

Return to opening case, and judge it.

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