On racism, Mennonite politics, and liberation
(Words we don't like to hear)

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The truth is that the church has spoken to us about our racism, and we act as though we think we have listened. But we need to confess that the content of that speaking and the quality of our listening have not brought us to the corporate transformation toward racial justice Mennonites need. I believe two major factors contribute to our failure to complete this transformation. One is our unwillingness to recognize and then reform the politics of the church, and a second is our failure to embrace theological categories that are adequate to the task.

Two factors contribute to the church's failure to complete the transformation toward racial justice we need: our unwillingness to recognize and reform the politics of the church, and our failure to embrace adequate theological categories.

Mennonite politics

My father, a political scientist, taught me a valuable lesson about power and the church. Though Mennonites don't want to admit it, everything in our church life is political, from how we choose and appoint our leaders, to the words we use to describe what we believe, to where we send our children to school, to how we worship at our conventions.

We like to think we are not like other people. With our faith comes an impulse to be different, a need to feel distinct not only from the world but even from other Christians. One aspect of this sense of distinctiveness is a resistance to facing the political nature of church life. We resist thinking of the church politically because we associate politics with the world and the state, two things we believe the church is not! But if we are to deal with the reality of racism in the church, we will need to admit that we are political.

Kay Lawson, also a political scientist, has written, "One common definition of politics is simply the allocation of scarce

resources, using the word *scarce* to mean 'not unlimited.'" She adds that politics is also "a means of organizing collective human activity" that affects "almost any collective decision-making process, especially if there is a hint of struggle and controversy over 'who gets what, when, how.'"[1] "Politics means seeking and using…power…to make allocations of scarce resources throughout a given polity."[2] In Lawson's sense of the word, the Mennonite Church is a political reality. Unless we confront our penchant for being in denial about our politics in general, we will lack the tools we need to change our race politics in particular.

In the early 1990s, Mennonites concerned about the church's attitudes about racism and our lack of racial consciousness organized a gathering called "Restoring Our Sight." Attendance surpassed the planning group's expectations, indicating significant energy for talking about racism, and a significant legacy of pain because white Mennonite lay people and leaders have done a poor job of self-examination.

One outcome of the gathering was that Mennonites joined the anti-racism movement and established the Damascus Road Anti-Racism Process, a program of Mennonite Central Committee U.S. The anti-racism movement is a larger, global phenomenon with an accompanying body of literature.[3] Damascus Road has helped Mennonites begin to change the race politics of the church by giving us a way of understanding racism in sociological terms.[4] In the Damascus Road process, denominational institutions—congregations, colleges, seminaries, and other agencies—recruit teams of people from their staff and/or membership to receive training. Each team returns to its sending institution with a plan for dismantling institutionalized racism found in the systems of operation and organizational culture of their institution. The success of this work requires that participants come to an understanding of what racism is and why Christians must understand their vocation as standing against racism. Damascus Road invites us to understand racism in a specific way:

> *Racism is not the same thing as individual race prejudice and bigotry. All people are racially prejudiced (regardless of racial/ethnic identity). It is part of the air we breathe. It is socialized into every person. But this does not mean*

> *that everyone is racist. Racism is more than race prejudice. It is more than individual attitudes and actions. Racism is the collective actions of a dominant racial group. Power turns race prejudice into racism. Racial prejudice becomes racism when one group's racial prejudices are enforced by the systems and institutions of a society, giving power and privilege based on skin color to the group in power and limiting the power and privilege of the racial groups that are not in power.*[5]

So the Damascus Road definition of racism looks like this: race prejudice + the misuse of power by and within systems = racism. Racism is created by three abuses of power throughout societal systems that organize our common life. Systemic power is "the legitimate/legal ability to access and/or control those institutions sanctioned by the state." The analysis identifies the three abuses of systemic power as Power[1], Power[2], and Power[3]. An example of Power[1] is the way we usually try to fix racism by dealing with the feelings and actions of individuals instead of looking at the ways systems affect people personally. Power[2] is "white privilege," the benefits of racism often unintentionally extended to and accepted by white people. Consider the following: "As a white person, I can find positive white role models depicted on TV"; "I can attend college and find that most professors look like me and talk like me and that most of the curriculum reflects my culture, history, and background"; "No one thinks I got my job just because of my skin color." Power[3] is the power racism has to control and destroy everyone. In other words, it is racism's goal to make all people of color victims, and all white people racist. This kind of power affects self-identity, especially in groups that are racially defined.[6]

Changing our theological categories

Our involvement in the anti-racism movement has helped us begin to act against racism by giving us more language and a way of understanding racism in sociological terms, but Damascus Road has not yet effectively challenged and changed the church's theological categories.

In February 2000, Damascus Road staff articulated a new training philosophy.

1. *As followers of Jesus, we understand the call of God to work against all forms of oppression.*
2. *Crisis is necessary for both personal and systemic change.*
3. *While both people and institutions need to change, Damascus Road's primary organizing work is, through anti-racist education, to prepare teams to act as change agents in their institutions.*[7]

We could undertake a critique of this training philosophy from an ideological perspective, but that would be too easy and we would miss the real issue. What we need to do, what would take courage and confession, would be to embrace the first statement—"As followers of Jesus, we understand the call of God to work against all forms of oppression"—realizing that a theological claim is being made: the God being talked about here is a God of liberation. Does Mennonite theology give us a framework for worshiping, teaching and preaching about, and confessing faith in such a God? Although the new Mennonite confession of faith often mentions justice, it does not name oppression adequately.

We often fail to understand that racial minorities in the U.S. and Canada need God and talk about God for reasons that most white people do not share. These reasons are easily found in daily news reports as well as episodes in our national histories that are not far in the past. Instead of trying to discern if Mennonites use God-talk that keeps racism alive, instead of coming to see when we have felt theologically justified in being racist, we act as though our peacemaking God-talk means we cannot be racist. Confession that moves us through awareness into action necessitates this additional theological reflection.

The Civil Rights Movement was all about struggling for Black liberation. All that organizing and agitating was about more than getting the right to vote or sit down at a lunch counter in the South. It was about redeeming the soul of a nation. As Mennonites, we tend to think it is folly to presume that our nation has a soul and that it can experience God's redemption. But when you are an African American or other disenfranchised member of society, you have to believe such a thing is possible if you are going to live fully.[8] The alternative to this view of the state is nationalism, and its limitations are obvious.[9]

We need to begin confessing that our predicament with racism is tied up with the fact that we are not accustomed to talking about the three persons of the Trinity in liberation terms. We tend to think about the Godhead primarily through the lenses of a prophetic but suffering Jesus and of Paul's exalted Christ. Communities formed to worship, obey, and witness to God's great liberating acts and power articulate a gospel that challenges Mennonite assumptions about what Jesus came to do. We need to confess that we lack an adequate understanding of Jesus as one who came to liberate the oppressed from their suffering at the hands of the powerful.

White Mennonites do not think of themselves as sitting on top of the food chain. They think of themselves as the quiet in the land, as displaced refugees, conscientious objectors ridiculed by non-pacifist neighbors, war-tax resisters. However true these identities have been, they should not mask the fact that European Mennonites are white, and being white has political relevance, just as being African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American does. This is the case whether one is from the U.S. melting pot that has boiled over or the Canadian multicultural mosaic that tries to be open to and welcome difference.

If we are to be true to our peace church heritage, we have to come to terms with the ways we have participated in white power. To do so, we will need to be in conversation with Christians who are not white.

We are a historic peace church, and we have struggled to comprehend what racism is and means to us because we understand peace to be linked with justice, a sense of right relationship with others, and the deep desire to act in accordance with God's will for the human polity. But if we are to be true to our peace church heritage, we have to come to terms with the ways we have participated in white power. To do so, we will need to be in conversation with Christians who are not white. We use ecumenical conversations as a way to offer our peculiar theological and biblical perspectives on militarism, violence, and Jesus' call to peacemaking. But the conversation partners we seek out are denominations that are predominantly white. Why don't we look for opportunities to converse with Hispanic denominations and with those of the Historical Black Church? I

believe we need to think about the politics of this kind of conversation. To do so means posing tough questions—and engaging in a different kind of listening, a different kind of confession—that I see most Mennonite academics, pastors, and lay people avoiding, especially if they are white.

We need to ask ourselves if our understanding of God has anything to do with racism, and if so, how. Damascus Road and the anti-racism movement seem to suggest that God has everything to so with our concern for confronting racism, yet the idea that Jesus Christ breaks down all the dividing walls was not enough to pass anti-lynching laws or end school desegregation. Many Mennonites know this from firsthand experience. So where is it in our theology? We must confess that very little of the experience of racist violence has shaped how we talk about God in our academic theology and preaching. We must also confess that when the church has done theological reflection on the nature of racism, we have failed to engage those reflections in transforming ways. Our Damascus Road project is a form of engagement that has stuck, but people in the pews have not adopted the theological language of liberation.

Beyond denominational statements

From the mid-1970s into the '90s, the church used its voice to begin naming the evil of racism. The denominational statements summarized below show that the impulse to confront and rebuke the power of racism in our church body has been acted on. These statements make the case for understanding racism as sin that is corporate. In the earlier statements summarized below, church members are called to distance themselves from racism, but in the more recent statements, we can see the emphasis shift. Instead of understanding racism as something that characterizes un-Christian "bad" people, the church has adopted the view that it is folly to think we can distance ourselves from racism: the systems we participate in every day are propped up by racist practices. Along with this shift comes strongly confessional language calling white Mennonites to repent of their complicity in these systems. But in spite of our efforts, we continue to falter because we do not yet know how to articulate theological commitments that are essential to speaking God's truth to the lies of racism.

Estes Park, Colorado, 1968: Urban Crisis Education. When the General Conference Mennonite Church met in Estes Park, Colorado, delegates passed a resolution calling for hiring personnel "to educate the Mennonite community on problems of minority groups and urban crisis," and recommended that these staff people, who would serve as part of the Commission on Home Ministries, be "members of the white, black and Indian communities."[10]

Harrisonburg, Virginia, 1973: Cross-Cultural Consultation. Delegates to the 1973 Mennonite Church General Assembly in Harrisonburg, Virginia, received a report from participants in the Cross-Cultural Theological Consultation. The findings of this consultation articulated by the steering committee included the following: "This consultation highlights the increasingly multi-ethnic character of the Mennonite Church in North America with seven different categories of congregations based on cultural lines.… There are also observable differences based on economic and social factors which cut across ethnic lines."

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1986: Building a Rainbow of Churches. At Saskatoon '86, General Conference delegates affirmed a plan to build up the General Conference "as a rainbow of churches" under the auspices of the biblical vision of "many people becoming God's people." This biblical vision became the convention theme for the joint MC/GC gathering at Normal '89.

Normal, Illinois, 1989: Many Peoples Becoming God's People. During the joint-convention in Illinois, the two delegate bodies adopted an important statement titled "A Church of Many Peoples Confronts Racism." It reads, "We confess that our church institutions…have not always escaped our society's pattern of institutional racism. We are called by the gospel to review our practices in employment, promotion, purchasing of materials, and inclusion of minorities on boards and committees. Where inequity is found, we need to repent, be reconciled, and take affirmative action to correct it." The statement called on congregations to celebrate ethnic and racial diversity by, among other things, observing the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States and remembering Louis Riel in Canada.[11]

Eugene, Oregon, 1991: On Observing 1992. At the Oregon '91 Mennonite Church General Assembly, delegates adopted "On

Observing 1992," which expressed the church's resolve to "recognize the greed and devastation that characterized the coming of the Europeans, and repent of [its] participation in the unjust exploitation of native peoples."

Wichita, Kansas, 1995: Statement on Racism. And finally, Wichita '95 was another joint assembly where the church again affirmed the biblical vision for unity among all peoples. Leaders from Hispanic Mennonite churches in the U.S. and Canada called all North American Mennonites "to transform our church structures, policies, and procedures to eliminate all vestiges of racism."

Atlanta, Georgia, 2003: ? My deep hope is that American Mennonites will take the months leading up to our next general assembly in Atlanta in 2003 to take another look at our race politics. Perhaps our congregations can spend time in study and reflection on how we have been shaped by racism and at times by resisting it.

Conclusion

As Damascus Road has gained momentum and church-wide recognition, skepticism about the politics of anti-racism and its rhetoric has also increased. I think some caution is warranted because we can easily speak liberation language in an uncritical voice. However, we must reflect on a difficult question: Does the skeptical response to anti-racism reveal anxiety about seeing ourselves, no matter what our color, as racially prejudiced people?

Confession is good for the soul. Consider what we might gain theologically by confessing that race politics creates feelings of doubt and discomfort. And consider what we might gain theologically by confessing faith in a God who urges us to listen with open hearts to voices that speak of liberation. When we proclaim that God is our liberator, we must discuss and argue about how we humans are to participate in that liberating activity as particular political communities. Mennonite theology can and does make space for this work as we journey together toward greater faithfulness in our living and listening.

Notes

[1] Kay Lawson, *The Human Polity: A Comparative Introduction to Political Science*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993), 11 (Lawson's italics).

[2] Ibid.
[3] Alastair Bonnett's *Anti-Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2000) gives readers historical background on the global anti-racism movement as well as a good discussion of anti-racism's impact, its practices, its relationship to nationalism and capitalism, the backlash against it. The book includes a comprehensive bibliography.
[4] I am using Mennonite Church without the national qualifiers because while Damascus Road is a program of Mennonite Central Committee U.S., members of Mennonite Church Canada have also received the training and/or are working to adapt some of the basic tenets of anti-racism work to reflect race politics affecting Canadian churches and institutions. While I was a student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary from 1998 to 2001, I was part of AMBS's Damascus Road team, so my observations come from firsthand experience as well as from reading and research.
[5] "The Damascus Road Anti-Racism Process: Part One, Anti-Racism Analysis" (9–12 April 1999), 1.4. From the Damascus Road training manual provided to each participant, available through Mennonite Central Committee's Peace & Justice Ministries Department, Akron, Pennsylvania.
[6] Ibid.
[7] *Damascus Road Newsletter* 3 (June 2000): 3.
[8] Reading anything by Martin Luther King, Jr., will quickly reveal this point in theological terms. A good place to begin is with this collection of his writings: James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther, King, Jr.* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
[9] These limits have been seen in situations of intense political conflict in many places around the world. But nationalism has also had an impact on Mennonite communities. Kay Lawson describes the nation as "a relatively large group of people who feel they belong together by virtue of sharing one or more of such traits as a common race, language, culture, history, or set of customs and traditions." Nationalism is the belief that what is in the best interest of the nation is more important than the interests of other nations or the international community as a whole (Lawson, *The Human Polity,* 584). I am sure these simple definitions evoke stories from heavily Eurocentric Mennonite communities that you might know.
[10] All of these citations can be found in the minutes and proceedings of the respective triennial sessions of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church general assemblies.
[11] AMBS did not observe MLK Day until 2000, the impetus being the work of the AMBS Damascus Road Team, not the voice of the church. Goshen College began holding its annual MLK Study Day in the mid-'90s, through the work of the multicultural affairs office. The event was funded by a grant from the Lily Endowment, not by contributions from the church.

About the author

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