

**TOWARD THE ELIMINATION OF RACISM
IN VANDERBILT DIVINITY SCHOOL
AND THE GRADUATE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION**

The Vanderbilt Divinity School and the Graduate Department of Religion have taken stands against various forms of racial prejudice within the University and, indeed, within the city of Nashville. In its catalogue, the Divinity School has stated its convictions:

The School affirms its commitment to do all in its power to combat the idolatry of racism that remains widespread in our society. Positively, this entails a commitment to take full account of the contributions of the black church to church and society. It requires the appointment of black members of the faculty, the active recruitment of black students for all programs, and adequate provisions for the needs of such students.

In spite of such convictions, until recently the School and Department have had few African-American faculty members, administrators, and students of color, and few courses which seriously attended “the contributions of the black church.” Observers might well suppose that a tacit racism lived within the corridors and classrooms of the School.

Meanwhile, America is changing. By the year 2020 more than one third of the American population will be made up of people who are now minorities, the majority of whom will be of African-American and Hispanic descent. Inevitably, graduates of the Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion will pursue their ministries or teaching careers in multi-racial/ethnic contexts. Therefore, the VDS/GDR community wishes to address the issue of racism so that, in turn, it may serve God’s purposes for a diverse world.

1. THEOLOGY

The Jewish and the Christian traditions affirm that we are made in the image of God to relate to one another in love. Further the traditions announce that we one family, brothers and sisters, under one divine Parent. God loves us, calls us, and intends a New Order in which evil is overcome and in which there is “Shalom” among humankind, reflecting the liberating love of God. A vision of God’s New Order in which contending human loyalties will be gathered into peace and justice and joy has animated our traditions throughout the centuries; it sings in spirituals and hymns; it speaks in our prayers: “your kingdom come.”

Our tradition is, however, open-eyed; it confesses the brokenness of the human world and the stubborn reality of sin. For Christians the violence of the cross is a witness to sin’s power to disrupt and destroy not only human community but to act against God’s will for the world. In sin, human beings will seek to preserve themselves and their social structures, resisting God’s redemptive purposes. Nevertheless, the Jewish and the Christian traditions celebrate God’s saving power in the world. Sin will be overcome.

Thus we regard racism as rebellion against God—against God’s creation, purposes, and promised salvation. For racism denies our common parentage under God, stands against the reconciliation God wills, and denies the sure promises of God’s word. Racism is not merely a thoughtless social aberration; it is a profoundly sinful and open rebellion against God.

Our tradition acknowledges God’s special concern for the oppressed. God called enslaved people out of Egypt. In the law, God demanded concern for the bereft, the orphaned, and those who are alien. Moreover, the ministry of Jesus Christ testifies to God’s own identification with social and religious outcasts, with the poor and the rejected.

The church, addressed by the risen Christ and animated by the Holy Spirit, announces God’s New Order and calls people everywhere into a new humanity. Because the church is baptized into God’s new humanity, it should be a sign of God’s promises, a “new creation,” a fellowship that transcends

loyalties of race or sex or class, an inclusive holy people. Thus the church, though broken, must strive in the power of the Spirit to be free from racism in its common life, its public worship, and its institutions.

2. RACISM

Prejudice is a prejudgment of and disdain toward others whose racial, ethnic, or class characteristics are regarded as different. Racism is prejudice plus social power. In racism, groups use power to isolate and exploit other groups. Thus, racist power seeks to preserve the privileges of a socially dominant group by the oppression of others. Racism is enforced by legal, cultural, religious, economic, and political force. So racism is not merely an attitude to be converted by religion or a pathology requiring therapy; it is an institutionalized systemic evil.

Racism is a form of social domination; it thrives in alliance with other forms of unjust domination. So racism interlocks with class domination, sexual domination, and political domination. As such racism is characteristic of all social institutions and fiercely resistant to change. Societies seek self-preservation, particularly in times of world-wide social change, and, therefore, willingly embrace racism rather than lose their 'power'.

Racism hurts human beings. It erodes the soul of those who oppress; it humiliates its victims. Racism creates in oppressors a false sense of superiority; in victims it creates an equally false sense of inferiority. Racism enlarges the rage of those it denies; it is profoundly painful for those it demeans. A huge hurt lives in the heart of those who are racially oppressed.

American Racism

Racism has disfigured American life for centuries. Though our founders proclaimed that "all men are created equal," in fact America has accorded special privilege to being white, male, Protestant, and English-speaking. Historically, white Protestants have controlled financial resources, political power, and most social institutions. Racism in America is "white racism".

The European colonists who came to America tended to be exclusive. They soon institutionalized racism by creating cultural and economic systems that condoned the oppression of non-white, non-Protestant peoples. Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans, Jews, and singularly African slaves have thus suffered repressive violence as well as economic, political, and religious oppression. Racism is woven into the fabric of American national life and foreign policy. As American national power ebbs, its resistance to social change seems to heighten. Racism recurs now as an ever more virulent social disease.

Though there is racism everywhere in America, its manifestations vary from region to region. In the South, racism has its own peculiar style and violent history.

Religious Racism

Although the Jewish and the Christian traditions have generated prophetic figures that have spoken the truth against American racism, and although in every age there have been religious peoples who have stood in solidarity with the victims of international, national, and ecclesial racism, nevertheless the church, judged by its own gospel, has been racist.

Competitive denominationalism in America encourages churches to be socially viable; thus, churches seek cultural endorsements. As a result churches may well assume predominant cultural values - and be less than prophetic in American life. Certainly, American churches are often as racist as the land in which they live.

Ecclesial racism cannot be cured merely by converting individual attitudes, for it lives in patterns of church polity, worship, and proclamation; therefore, it must be dealt with systematically by altering institutional priorities, power structures, and practices -- by a recasting of church tradition.

Obviously, racism within the churches is perpetuated in no small way through the training of church leadership. Theological seminaries in America maintain and sustain the position of white clergy with little regard to racial or ethnic traditions. For example, there have been black schools of theology but, for the most part, they have been separate and unequal. Moreover, within major seminaries the contribution of black churches and black church thinkers has been generally ignored or, if not ignored, depreciated. So theological education has participated in oppression, it has been designed to provide white clergy for white parishes, trained in a tradition that endorses a white Christianity.

3. THE DIVINITY SCHOOL

The Divinity School is part of Vanderbilt University, an institution established after the Civil War to contribute, in the words of its founder, "to strengthening the ties which should exist between all sections of our common country. The new university quickly succumbed, however, to the segregation and racism that became part and parcel of post- Reconstruction Southern culture. The ties that should exist between all peoples of our common country were not envisioned as part of Vanderbilt's mission. African-Americans and other ethnic minorities were, in the words of Paul Conkin, author of the definitive history of Vanderbilt, "the unwanted."

The Divinity School (including the (Graduate Department of Religion) shared in this heritage. It was not until 1953 that it admitted its first black student, and it was the first School of the University to do so. A crisis occurred in 1960 when James M Lawson, a B.D. candidate in the Divinity School, was expelled by the Chancellor, at the request of the Board of Trust, because of his leadership of and participation in the Nashville sit-ins. Subsequently, most of the Divinity faculty submitted their resignations, and the crisis was not resolved until Lawson was reinstated, but only after he had decided to complete his degree at another institution.

As a consequence of this event, the Divinity School became committed to the struggle for racial justice and adopted as part of its mission the education of black clergy. Many faculty and students participated in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. In 1969, Kelly Miller Smith became Assistant Dean on a part-time basis. But it was not until 1972 that the first full-time black appointment was made to the faculty, namely Peter Paris in ethics. Under the leadership of Smith and Paris, the Divinity School attracted a larger number of minority students than ever before. But Kelly Smith's tragic death in June 1984 and Peter Paris's resignation at the end of the 1984-85 academic year not only were a severe blow but also served as a reminder that the School had become complacent about its commitment to combat racism, appoint additional black faculty, and actively recruit black students.

Sustained searches over a two-year period led to the appointments of Walter Fluker in ethic and Renita Weems in Hebrew Bible, both effective in the fall of 1987. In the same year Wallace Charles Smith joined the faculty as Professor of the Practice of Ministry; and in 1988 Forrest Harris became Assistant Dean of Student Life and Director of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on the Black Church. Together with the contribution of Lewis Baldwin in the Department of Religious Studies, the Divinity School now found itself with more adequate resources in African American studies than ever before. The faculty determined, at its long- range planning retreat in May 1988, that development of the Kelly Miller Smith Institute should become a major priority of the School, it was recommended that an endowment be sought that will provide additional scholarship support for students, research funds for the study of the black church, and ultimately an additional faculty appointment. Minority enrollment has in the meantime increased to over 20% of the Divinity student body.

Despite the significant progress that has been made in recent years, racist attitudes are still present in the Divinity School, and much remains to be accomplished. An adequate support structure for minority students is not yet in place; and their numbers should increase until they approximate at least the percentage of minorities in the national population. The minority faculty is not yet tenured, its numbers must continue to grow, and resources need to be enhanced in areas such as black theology. The curriculum, while having become far more diverse in recent years, does not yet

sufficiently reflect the heritage, themes, and agendas of non-white, non-male, and non-Protestant cultures and traditions.

4. RACIAL AWARENESS IN A PLURALISTIC COMMUNITY

Racism is still present in the Divinity School, but it has assumed more subtle and less conscious forms than in the past. Our objective is to eliminate it. We recognize that the entrenched nature of racism and our tendencies to preserve present privileges and power structures make this a difficult task indeed. It will require a concerted effort on the part of every member of the student body, faculty, and staff. We must attend to our often unconsciously insensitive words, our still deeply ingrained prejudices, our careless attitudes, our fear and ignorance of others, our petty provincialisms. During 1988-89, the Divinity School sponsored a series of workshops on “Racial Awareness in a Pluralistic Community.” “Awareness” is the key term here; it is equivalent to what Latin American theologians have called “consciousness raising.”

The workshops helped to identify some very common ways in which members of our community (faculty, staff, and students alike) have manifested a lack of recognition of, or have made insensitive remarks to, those who are different from themselves. Awareness of these issues can best be enhanced by listing some concrete examples discussed by the workshops.

Lack of Recognition

- Assuming we know people when we don't.
- Assuming everyone thinks as we do.
- Lack of attention to the refectory staff.
- Prejudgment of minority students' abilities in courses.
- Failure to identify talents and contributions of others
- Not getting names right or taking time to learn them.
- Passing over people's questions.
- Not taking time for people's concerns.
- Focusing on one person as representative of the whole.,
- Assuming all black people are alike.
- Assuming that “white” is normative for value judgments, not recognizing that it is only one among several perspectives.

Insensitive Remarks

These are remarks that participants in the workshops reported having heard in our community:

- “You're here only because of a quota.”
- “If you ask a Korean student to read scripture during worship, he/she will sound like a Korean.”
- “Blacks and other minorities...”, “A black cloud on the horizon”; “a black-and-white issue; “black Monday”; “yellow-hearted”; “redskin”; “red neck”—and other metaphors reflecting negative values associated with color.
- “Why don't they turn that weird music off?”
- “All these Latinos; taking our jobs.”
- “Blacks are always late.”
- “I didn't realize he/she was Hispanic.”
- “Your folk...”
- “We don't think of you as black.”
- “You're not like the rest of them.”
- “You have a responsibility to speak for your group.”
- “Blacks think they are being victimized.”
- Using boy/girl references to adults.
- Pretending to understand and speak black dialect to blacks.

How Blacks Can Educate Whites about Racism

The workshops discussed the fact that a heavy burden is placed on minorities in the task of educating majorities about the realities of racism. Some strategies were discussed:

- Express feelings.
- Speak out when offended.
- Sometimes silence is itself a statement.
- Tutorial programs designed to teach cultural differences, and discussion groups on all aspects of racism.
- A minority's very presence is educative in the process of dealing with racism.
- The relative values of assertiveness, assimilation, and conflict for dealing with racism.
- The need for a critical mass to maintain the proper tension and conflict conducive to positive changes in racial attitudes.
- In dialogue, the question who controls the dialogue is important.

In one of the workshops, faculty and student groups were asked to formulate suggestions they would like to make to each other about the common project of eliminating racism in the Divinity School. Some of the suggestions from each group are listed here.

Faculty Suggestions to Students

- Continue to support the tutorial program for international students.
- Find ways to increase social contact and encourage interaction among diverse groups of students.
- Include concerns about racism and sexism in field placement settings
- Familiarize and educate yourselves with materials on racial identity, sensitivity, and culture.
- Acquaint yourselves with models for social change, appreciating the shifting definitions of race, gender, and class
- Participate in awareness groups for the purpose of discussing issues of racial pluralism and cultural differences and biases.
- Ensure that student organizations have diversity in leadership.
- Speak up when disturbed about issues of racism.

Student Suggestions to Faculty and Administration

- Be deliberate about calling attention to and correcting racist, sexist, and homophobic language and ideas encountered in course materials
- Include in each course a section on minority contributions, even for subjects where there is no current recognition of such contributions, excavating if necessary "the underside of history"
- Invite guest lecturers to speak to classes on minority contributions.
- Recognize that minority students probably, feel a great deal of pressure to excel; attend to the concern about grade discrimination
- Make an effort to spend time with students who are not like you- at lunch, coffee hour, etc.
- Show respect for the theological heritage of all students; do not be condescending or categorically critical of entire theologies; try, rather, to bring students to the point of self-criticism
- At orientation, provide a brief history of the School's involvement in the race struggle, including its current dilemmas and commitments
- Sponsor a weekly interracial luncheon—a kind of Divinity School eschatological banquet.

These examples can be extended considerably; they are intended only to help each of us to think about the issues involved and to encourage further discussion in the community as a whole. Combating racism is an ongoing, daily task, requiring continual vigilance

CONCLUSION

This statement reflects the commitment of Vanderbilt Divinity School and the Graduate Department of Religion to strive to deal seriously and honestly with the fact of racism. Even though we cannot

cure racism by personal decision or by group action, we must not despair in our resolve lest the prejudiced remain blind to prejudice and the hurt have their hurt enlarged. Therefore, in the freedom that the Spirit gives, we are pledged to seek to overcome racism within our community and the wider communities in which we live and serve.

THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT WAS APPENDED TO THIS DOCUMENT,
BY FACULTY ACTION, ON NOVEMBER 10, 1989.

We propose that VDS shall strive to embody free dialogue in which cultural, racial, and religious diversity will be honored and embraced. For dialogue to be free, the Divinity School must encourage mutual respect and Christian affection among all members of the community. Moreover, the School must seek to represent cultural diversity in its administration, staff, student body and faculty. The following positions seem necessary to the preservation of a diverse community in the Spirit:

- (1) The Divinity School shall deliberately seek to fill vacancies in faculty, administration, and staff with minority persons. To do so, the school must deliberately adopt and publish search policies beyond usual University procedures so as to assure a full consideration of minority candidates.
- (2) The Divinity School shall seek to create special scholarship funds and/or financial aid so that the School community may display a diversity beyond University or national averages. In addition, the School shall provide such staff support as may be necessary to ensure the recruiting, retaining, and academic achievement of minority students.
- (3) Faculty members will be required to be familiar with literature within their disciplines that reflects a concern for those groups within the nation and world who are oppressed by racism and other forms of social domination or neglect. A tri-annual review of course content and bibliography will be conducted by an appropriate faculty committee so as to assist the faculty in fulfilling their responsibility to the concerns of a diverse community.
- (4) The curriculum of the Divinity School while remaining true to its theological orientation shall seek to represent, study and reflect on patterns of Christian life that may be different from the ethos of white Southern Protestantism so that students may be prepared to minister in a diverse society.

Revised August 21, 1990