

# **This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith**

*ROBERT J. PRIEST  
ALVARO L. NIEVES,  
Editors*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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of Heaven

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*Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*

Edited by

ROBERT J. PRIEST

AND ALVARO L. NIEVES

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This Side  
of Heaven



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# Introduction

*Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves*

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The above prayer implicitly recognizes the pervasiveness of sin, injustice, and suffering. But rather than express a longing for withdrawal or escape, this prayer expresses a desire that communities of earth would come to reflect ideals of heaven. “Thy will be done on earth” is not only a prayer, it is a commitment we are expected to embrace and participate in. Christians are to seek peace (Heb 12:14), to hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice (Matt 5:6), to love and actively embrace “others” (Rom 15:7).

Heaven gives us images of perfection, of ideals already achieved: of joy, peace, unity, harmony, and love. People of every ethnic group gather in unity around the throne of God (Rev 7:9–10). In heaven we find no suffering, no sin, no conflict and no struggle. Heaven represents “rest.” On occasion, Christians have claimed that their social communities already exemplify such ideals, and that harmonious conformity is all that is now required. The above prayer, however, positions us as living in a world of the “not yet”: a world where sin is still present (both in ourselves and others), a world characterized by suffering, injustice, discord, violence, and death. We may claim “citizenship in heaven” (Phil 3:20), but we live “on this side of heaven.” On this side of heaven we live in social arenas that call us not to accommodate and conform, but to critique and resist evil (in self and others), to confront powers, and to seek reconciliation. We are called to suffering, to conflict, and to struggle. And yet such suffering and struggle is informed by the hope that

we have in Jesus Christ, and in the future he ensures. This book is intended to reflect the authors' own commitment to the above prayer, a commitment inspired by ideals of heaven, but thoroughly grounded in our own earthly social and historical settings.

### The Origins of This Book

This book emerged out of a series of activities at two schools in the Chicago area. During the 2000–2001 school year, seven ethnically diverse faculty members teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), with funding from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, gathered every two weeks for lunch to discuss seminary education and pastoral training in a racialized and ethnically diverse society and world. In the preceding twenty years, the proportion of European American students at this historically Scandinavian seminary had dropped from 98 percent to 59 percent—a massive shift in the ethnic makeup of the student body. And yet, as in most American seminaries, changes at the level of faculty and curriculum came more slowly. In 2000 nearly half of all accredited seminaries in America lacked even one ethnic minority on the faculty, and half of the rest had but one. This represents a serious weakness in the educational institutions committed to forming and shaping the next generation of religious leadership in America. TEDS had four ethnic minority faculty at this time, each of whom participated in our lunch gatherings, and one of whom, Tite Tiénou, was selected as the new academic dean at TEDS during this year.

During our lunch discussions we asked questions like: In what ways do students from divergent ethnic backgrounds encounter in seminary taken-for-granted practices, assumptions, evaluational criteria, and intellectual questions that privilege cultural patterns, interests, aesthetics, and experiences of white Christian communities? Are minority students socialized away from the competencies and understandings needed for ministry success in their own communities? Are majority students socialized to appreciate and learn from the experiences, questions, concerns, insights, worship aesthetics, and ministry skills of believers from other ethnic or racial groups? To what extent and in what ways do we, in our classes, relate biblical understandings of creation, human identity, ecclesiology, justice, sin, reconciliation, forgiveness, mission, and the kingdom of God to the world of ethnic and racial ideologies, prejudices, struggles with stigma, resentments, aggressions, boundaries and hierarchies of wealth, class, and power? How do we as faculty motivate ourselves, and our students, to redirect long-established reading, teaching, research and writing patterns oriented largely toward a white/Euro-American world in constructive new directions? With what vision and incentives? Our conversations were lengthy.

During this year, two professors from Wheaton College joined us: Alvaro Nieves, a Latino sociologist, and Hank Allen, an African American sociologist. Through them we discovered the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities

(CCCU), and found that they also were struggling with how to transform historically white Christian schools into communities responsive to the ethnic and racial diversity that is America and the world. They too were interested in engaging racial and ethnic diversity from within an explicit framework of Christian faith.

Out of these lunch gatherings, we concluded that we needed to foster an interdisciplinary and interethnic intellectual community with sustained patterns of interaction as the base from which to work for understanding and constructive change. Over the next year an expanded group of faculty from Wheaton and Trinity carried out a series of activities focused on race and ethnicity. We read and discussed books together, attended retreats together, taught classes together, read and discussed one another's writings, and convened a conference focused on teaching about race and ethnicity in the context of Christian higher education—a conference attended by many contributors of this book.

We discovered that in the last decade Christian colleges and seminaries had added numerous courses focused on race and ethnicity, but that the faculty of these courses almost universally complained of difficulty in finding appropriate books for their students to read. Books on race and ethnicity written for religious audiences are all too often written at a popular level with moral passion, but fail to exemplify sophisticated historical, anthropological, and sociological understandings of race, culture, ethnic identity, and racial hierarchy. Alternatively, while there are hundreds of books on race and ethnicity written in a more secular voice, many of these exemplify an antireligious bias that makes it difficult for devoutly religious students to trust these authors when they challenge racial and ethnic assumptions that do need to be challenged. Even when an antireligious bias is not present, these books generally fail to explore the particular linkages with which seminarians and other Christians need help. That is, scholars who taught Christian students about race and ethnicity suggested the need for a book that represented cutting-edge biblical, theological, historical, anthropological, psychological, and sociological scholarship and that would constructively explore the linkages that they and their students needed help in exploring: What has been the history of Christian churches and leaders in relation to slavery, segregation, and apartheid? What biblical texts and doctrines have historically been employed on behalf of racial projects? What biblical texts and doctrines are relevant to the racial and ethnic crises of our day? How have, and how might, religious leaders constructively engage such crises? How do congregations shape the values, civic commitments, understandings, and sensitivities of their membership in ways that positively or negatively affect congregants' ways of engaging an ethnically and racially diverse society? In what ways can local congregations be sites for racial reconciliation and justice initiatives? Are there positive models for how churches and other religious institutions have helped to bring healing to racial and ethnic tensions and divides? How might Christians in the professions work to bring justice to business, education, government, and other areas of society? When good intentions fail to accomplish desired ends, how do we analyze what went wrong?

As a result of this feedback, we concluded that an interethnic and interracial team of scholars from diverse disciplines ought to collaborate in such a writing project. Scholars from Bethel University, Eastern University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Harvard University, Loyola University, Spring Arbor University, and Taylor University joined scholars from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Wheaton College for this writing project. We met annually for three two-day retreats to discuss and plan this joint publication. We were concerned that a book written by authors from diverse disciplines and ethnic backgrounds would require sustained effort to achieve sufficient integration and coherence, and thus committed to a process of writing and rewriting. We solicited feedback from nationally recognized scholars with relevant expertise, received extensive feedback from students in several seminary and college classes, and reworked our chapters in the light of that feedback.

### Distinctives of This Book

This book, then, has several distinctives. First, it is interdisciplinary. Anthropologists, biblical scholars, church historians, pastoral, missional, and systematic theologians, psychologists, and sociologists have all contributed. Second, the authors are ethnically diverse. Four contributors are African American (Bacote, Griffin, Frederick McGlathery, McNeil), two are Latino (Nieves, Pozzi), three are Asian American (Cha, Kang, Pao), one is originally from Burkina Faso, though now a U.S. citizen (Tiénou), and others are of European ancestry (Hiebert, Howell, Jessup, Jindra, Meneses, Paris, R. Priest, K. Priest, Sweeney, and Thomas). Third, this book emerged out of a sustained pattern of relationship and interaction on the part of the authors. We know one another and are friends.

Fourth, while this book covers a wide range of topics related to race and ethnicity, it retains a central focus on religious, and more specifically, Christian, institutions and discourses. While earlier scholars believed that government and public education were the primary institutions that could engage social problems related to ethnicity and race, many scholars are increasingly recognizing both the limits of these institutions and that other institutions, especially religious ones, may play a pivotal role either in contributing to a “racialized” society and world, or in promoting reconciliation. For example, the recent influential book *Divided by Faith* (Emerson and Smith 2000) argues that evangelical Christians and their religious institutions have contributed to the “racialization” of our society, but that paradoxically such Christians are also among the most energetic and willing to engage problems associated with race. As authors we are deeply conscious of moral failures vis-à-vis race on the part of Christian communities, but are also deeply convinced that resources, understandings, and motivations inspired by Christian faith can provide significant correctives to ethnic and racial prejudices, animosities, boundaries, and hierarchies of wealth and power.

Fifth, the authors of this book explicitly write out of personal Christian faith. Until recently, normative expectations for scholarly writing insisted that scholarship be written in a secular voice. But recent trends in many disciplines stress “positioned” knowledge, with faith-informed scholarship increasingly seen as having a valued place in public academia (Marsden 1997; Roberts and Turner 2000; Priest 2001; Sterk 2002; Dovre 2002; Frederick 2003; Howell 2005). Especially when the subject involves religion and normative ideals concerning race and ethnicity, there is simply no fully objective or neutral position from which to write. But while many of these chapters explicitly appeal to normative texts within the Christian tradition, each author writes for a public audience in accord with scholarly standards of their discipline.

Finally, while many of our authors have interests abroad, and while Christianity is a global movement (Jenkins 2002) strategically positioned to engage worldwide ethnic and racial problems, this book retains a focus on the authors’ own country, the United States of America. With a population that is 1.5 percent Native American, nearly 5 percent Asian American, 13 percent African American, and 14 percent Latino, the United States is steadily growing in the proportion of its population not originally from Europe. The forty million Latinos in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center 2004), for example, outnumber the total populations of Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Bolivia combined. There are more Latinos in the United States than Canadians in Canada.

The United States is one of the world’s most ethnically diverse nations. It has experienced great evils associated with race and ethnicity, but also significant reforms. It is also one of the most religious nations, with Christianity continuing numerically to be the religion of choice, even among recent non-European immigrants (Warner, forthcoming). African Americans overwhelmingly self-identify as Christian (over 90 percent), a majority of these Protestant. Asian Americans self-identify religiously (Tseng et al. 2005) as Protestant (26 percent), Catholic (20 percent), Buddhist (15 percent), Hindu (6 percent), and Muslim (2 percent). Latinos mostly identify religiously (Espinosa et al. 2003) as Catholic (70 percent) or Protestant (23 percent). Native Americans have a religious profile fairly “similar to that of white non-Hispanic Americans” (Kosmin, Mayer, Keysar 2001): with 20 percent Baptist, 17 percent Catholic, and so forth. Only 3 percent identify as adherents of “Indian” or tribal religion.

As a result of 1965 changes in immigration laws ending discrimination against non-Europeans, Christian communities in America now consist of immigrants from Africa, India, Korea, China, and Latin America, as well as Europe. Indeed, several authors of this book are present in America precisely because of 1965 changes in immigration laws. Andrew Walls, Scottish historian of global Christianity, has argued (2002, 69) that “the great issues of twenty-first-century Christianity” will concern relations across such ethnic lines, and that “the principal Christian significance of the United States” now rests in its Christian ethnic diversity and strategic global links. He suggests that “more than in any other nation in the world, the body of Christ could be realized—or fractured—in the United States.” With Walls, we are convinced that the ways in which American

Christians engage ethnic and racial diversity is potentially crucial for the larger world. If this book can, in some small way, help American Christians better understand and engage these realities, the results will be felt more broadly.

## Organization of the Book

### *Part 1: Thinking Critically about Culture, Race, and Color*

Jenell Williams Paris situates the task of this book within the biblical mandate (Rom 12:1–2) to resist being “conformed” to this “world” and its ideas, but to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The biblical assumption here is that even when Christians claim citizenship in heaven (Phil 3:20), they live in earthly societies that quite naturally shape what they assume and take for granted. Thus the Christian is called to a biblically mandated task of deconstructing many taken-for-granted ideas, and reconstructing our thinking, our lives, and our communities on more solid foundations.

Paris’s chapter examines the construct of “race” or “races,” whereby individuals are assigned to social categories on the basis of physical attributes, in the belief that natural and separate divisions, akin to subspecies, exist within humankind. Historically, the idea of “race” assumed inherent differences in socially relevant abilities and characteristics between biologically based human types, hence that such biologically based differences are a legitimate basis of invidious distinctions between groups defined as races. Alternatively, such biologically based differences are assumed to explain the differential socioeconomic success of people of different “races.”

Paris suggests that “race” is one of the most damaging ideas of the modern world, a concept absent from the biblical world, though taken for granted by members of modern societies. She provides an overview of the history of racial ideologies and of social formations based on such ideologies, and suggests that race, as biological construct, is simply invalid and must be deconstructed. The social formations grounded in racial ideologies are human constructions, not biological givens. Eloise Hiebert Meneses’ chapter provides a more detailed examination and critique of the biological construct of race, summarizing recent understandings of human genetic relatedness.

But while both Paris and Meneses critique the biological construct of race, this construct has historically been treated as real and instantiated in discourses, laws, census categories, and in ideologies of identity and difference. Race as social construct or social formation is all too real. Thus Paris and Meneses introduce two ideas, maintained throughout this volume, that race as a biological construct is invalid, but that the social formations grounded in this ideology are nonetheless real and must be understood and addressed. Readers must thus understand that when authors of this book deny the validity of the idea of race, it is the biological construct that they deny. When they sometimes proceed to treat race as real, and to use a vocabulary of race (“white,” “black,” “interracial,” “multiracial,” etc.), it is race as social construction that is in view.

While “race” roots identity in supposed biologically determined categories, Meneses suggests that criteria for group identity vary empirically, and that anything from phenotype to language, culture, or religion may provide the boundary markers that a group selects to distinguish itself or to distinguish the ethnic other. An analytical category that recognizes the variable and arbitrary nature of these boundary markers is that of “ethnicity,” a concept that Meneses suggests is a more adequate analytical category than that of race.

Social groups that regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as constituting a social group based on shared heritage (i.e., having real or putative common ancestry and having memories of a shared past) and on shared markers of identity (which may include any combination of cultural, linguistic, religious, or racial markers) are ethnic groups. Such social group categories are historically and situationally constructed. As Carlos Pozzi’s chapter will demonstrate, it is only after they arrive in the United States that many Latin Americans come to see themselves in terms of U.S. ethnic categories like “Latino” or “Hispanic.” Chinese, Jew, Serb, Croat, Hutu, Tutsi, Latino, African American, European American, or Asian American are all ethnic categories. The boundaries between such groups are variously constructed through linguistic, religious, cultural, or racial markers. In some cases “race” is not part of an ethnic boundary (think of Serb versus Croat). An ethnic category may not even coincide with a “race” category. The U.S. Census, for example, assumes that Latinos/Hispanics can be of different “races”—with some Latinos “white” and others “black,” for example. That is, Latinos may have exclusively European ancestry, or Native American ancestry, or African ancestry, or may have any combination of the above. But if their more immediate ancestors come from Latin America, and their heritage (culturally and linguistically) has links to this region of the world, they become part of a single new ethnic category: Latino. A single individual may be “Latino” within a system of “ethnic categorization,” while also being “white” or “black” within a system of “racial categorization.” This is why we get such ethnoracial phrases as “non-Hispanic white.” The ethnic category “African American,” on the other hand, identifies a social group with memories of a shared history (related to the black American experience of slavery, segregation, discrimination, etc.), but a history in which the very idea of race helped to construct the boundaries. Here race and ethnicity overlap, although not completely. Many individuals categorized as “black” within a system of racial categories (recent arrivals from Brazil or Nigeria, for example), would not be “African American” because they lack the shared heritage that this ethnic category implies. In short, “race” and “ethnicity” are divergent, but frequently overlapping, constructs.

In any case, Meneses concludes that the New Testament calls into question even the primacy of ethnic identities and loyalties, and provides a new basis of identity and loyalty that crosscuts partisan ethnic or racial loyalties.

Carlos Pozzi, in his chapter “Race, Ethnicity, and Color among Latinos in the United States,” both introduces the reader to America’s largest ethnic minority, and illustrates the variable nature of ethnic and racial ideologies and categories. Rather than being immutable because biologically “there,” racial



categories are elaborated in diverse ways across Latin America and the United States.

The differences between ethnic groups should be understood not as determined by genetic racial codes but in terms of “culture,” Michael Jindra suggests in his chapter “Culture Matters.” Culture consists of learned patterns of behavior, value, and belief widely shared among members of a given society or social group. People acquire culture through their participation in community, and cultural patterns will vary from one community to another. At one level, all Americans comprise a community with a shared, and continually evolving, culture. And yet, within broad commonalities, there are also cultural differences between (and within) different ethnic communities. Immigrant communities come to America with diverse cultural traditions, and their experience in America has varied enormously depending on how they were racially categorized in the American setting. Such differing experiences, grounded in history and social, economic, and political structures, have markedly affected patterns of social identity, relationship, and cultural change. Jindra explores the relationship of culture to history, social structure, race, socioeconomic success, and educational outcomes.

Culture involves learned ideas and values. When we encounter differences of ideas and values, Jindra suggests, we need to steer between two errors—that of ethnocentric judgment (judgment based on criteria that are simply internal to my own culture) and that of relativism (not exercising any judgment at all). Jindra suggests that all cultures will have elements that need to be corrected by Scripture, but also that within the culture of every community are large swaths of culture that are *adiaphora*—neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture. The apostle Paul provides a model for Christians. In interactions with cultural others he did not privilege his own culture at their expense, but instead accommodated and affirmed their culture—becoming “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22).

If differences between ethnic communities are better understood in terms of culture than in terms of biological race, then it is important in a multicultural society that members of that society understand culture and develop multicultural competence. Americans who work in helping professions (ministry, teaching, counseling, etc.) will often face challenges posed by cultural differences. Psychology has recently developed a whole new wave of thinking and research related to helping others in the context of cultural differences. In the final chapter of this section, psychologists J. Derek McNeil and Carlos Pozzi discuss the need for multicultural competency and outline ways in which multicultural competency can be fostered.

## *Part 2: Encountering the Other in Ethnic and Racialized Worlds*

In the first section of this book, basic concepts related to race, ethnicity, and culture are elaborated. In the second section are several chapters that provide analytic accounts of encounters between people of European ancestry and people of other ancestry, especially African ancestry. Paul Hiebert begins with a

very wide-ranging summary of historical ways in which Europeans responded to social “others.” He suggests that historical ways of forming oppositional identities and organizing them hierarchically must be countered by biblical teaching focusing on our common humanity, the oneness found in Christ, and the mandate to welcome others, to serve, to seek reconciliation, and to tear down walls that divide.

Joseph L. Thomas and Douglas A. Sweeney focus their historical lens on race relations in American Evangelical Christianity. They explore the history of evangelical ministry across the racial divide, accommodations made to slavery and segregation, the founding of black churches, and the impact of African American Christianity on white evangelicalism. Robert Priest then focuses on a single white evangelical educational institution in the segregationist American South. He explores the way in which key individuals responded to the racialized ideologies and structures of their society while trying to minister within their society, and explores their struggles with the contradictions between their own accommodationist practices and their most fundamental Christian commitments. Finally, Marla Frederick McGlathery and Traci Griffin examine a historically and culturally white parachurch mission organization established during the height of the civil rights era, that currently employs a significant number of African Americans. They explore tensions experienced by African American staff, and especially women, that emerge from the fact that this organization exemplifies conservative social and political attitudes widely shared by theologically conservative suburban whites, but not by theologically conservative black Christians. Given the variability of the term *conservative* in American society, how do we come to understand and appreciate the complexity of evangelical experiences? In their essay, Frederick McGlathery and Griffin consider practical implications and possible solutions for such theologically conservative organizations.

### *Part 3: Using and Abusing the Bible in Ethnic and Racial Contexts*

Michael Jessup begins this section with a chapter on white hate groups, exploring their usage of biblical passages and images in the service of racial hatred. While these groups are heretical in terms of every historic Christian creed, and while responsible biblical scholars will consider the hermeneutic of such groups laughable, it would be a mistake to ignore them and their use of Scripture. Churches must do the hard and careful work of reliably setting forth what Scripture teaches about racial and ethnic realities today.

David Pao, a New Testament scholar, provides a model of just such careful scholarship. He explores the writings of Luke, demonstrating that Luke uses two metaphors (family and table fellowship) to address the issue of the identity of God’s people, identities no longer to be defined by ethnicity or blood. That is, Pao demonstrates that the gospel message, as set forth by Luke, relativizes identities grounded in race or ethnicity and brings diverse people together in a new family of God, the church, established by faith in Jesus.

Vincent Bacote, a theologian, argues that key biblical themes (creation and biblical anthropology, Christology, Pentecost, eschatology) and Christian practices (such as hospitality or forgiveness) are directly relevant to present ethnic/racial realities. When the church fulfills its teaching function not only through teaching and preaching Scripture but through practices of worship, baptism, and Eucharist, the church will create a distinctive countercultural community that is ethnically diverse and that provides a foretaste of God's coming kingdom.

Pao and Bacote call for and model a responsible exposition of Scripture, in contrast to the extreme abuses of Scripture discussed by Jessup. But some racial misreadings of Scripture are more subtle and mainstream than those articulated by hate groups. Tite Tiénou suggests that mainstream commentators of Scripture during the heyday of racial ideologies took such racial ideologies for granted, and illegitimately read modern racial constructs back into Scripture, leaving such racial assumptions embedded in the commentaries they produced. This contributed to such racial constructs being seen as natural and God given. Pastors and biblical scholars who continue to rely on such commentaries end up repeating, and thus perpetuating, racial discourses of an earlier era. Tiénou takes as his test discourses on Samaritans as "racial half-breeds." Other biblical passages and themes can be examined in similar ways (cf. Goldenberg 2003).

Steve Kang argues that it is irresponsible and damaging to the global church when Scripture is read and interpreted only by one segment of the global church that privileges its own interpretations as objective. It must be the whole people of God in partnership, out of diverse contexts, that produces a full and responsible reading of Scripture bearing witness to God's kingdom. Such a reading helps to bring kingdom ideals into existence.

#### *Part 4: Engaging Racial and Ethnic Realities in Congregational Settings*

America's 350,000 congregations are both implicated in American racialized patterns and are potentially strategic sites for constructively engaging such racialization. In the final section of this book, we focus on congregations as a base for cultural and racial engagement. First, we examine how recent changes in immigration patterns have created opportunities to rethink and rework the way "church" is done—focusing on two separate cases of Asian immigrants: Filipino Americans (Bayt Priest) and Korean Americans (Cha). Second, we turn to historical racial divides (black/white) that have been engaged in congregational settings—in one case with painfully disappointing results (Bayt Priest and Priest) and in the other with a measure of success, though not without challenges (Howell). In each case, important lessons are there to be learned. Then we end with a chapter (Nieves) designed to help congregational leaders gather information about their communities that enables them to develop ministries responsive to ethnic diversity.

Kersten Bayt Priest begins the section by examining changes that took place when new immigrant Filipinos slowly started to attend a historically European American Roman Catholic church in suburban Chicago. As “outsiders,” fellow Filipinos bonded into a subgroup. But genuine interest and respect on the part of parishioners and a new senior priest eventually brought key individuals from the Filipino community into leadership and allowed distinctively Filipino religioethnic celebrations to be permanently included in public worship. The parish now proudly pursues a mission of racial/ethnic “harmony” with several weekends annually set aside for worship to reflect diverse worship traditions of each ethnic group within the parish. Multicultural efforts necessarily require interpersonal negotiation at the local level to achieve Christian community across racial, ethnic, and even intergenerational divides. Different minority groups have distinctive concerns that shape emergent approaches to worship and congregational life. Thus, Peter Cha focuses on the partnership of two Korean Presbyterian congregations in the Chicago area, one a first-generation Korean church, and the other a second-generation (English-language) congregation. He suggests that these ethnic churches are ethnic not because they are responding to or reflecting racism and prejudice, but because their members face culturally specific challenges that such ethnic churches are best prepared to address. He focuses specifically on generational challenges that these two congregations jointly addressed. While Cha stresses the value of multicultural churches, he suggests that the “Christian community needs to recognize the value of diversity as well as of unity, of ethnic congregations as well as of multicultural ones.”

The historic divide between African American and European American Christians is taken up in the final chapters of the section. Kersten Bayt Priest and Robert Priest analyze the attempted merger of two South Carolina Baptist congregations, one black and one white. They focus on the ways in which divergent worship practices resulted in (a) conflict over the place and meaning of such practices, (b) interactions that resulted in certain worship practices being favored over others, (c) emergence of varying alternative strategies of accommodation, withdrawal, or resistance, and (d) the reemergence of racial/ethnic identities and boundaries. The chapter ends with practical implications.

In contrast with this unsuccessful merger effort, Brian Howell focuses on a fairly large and growing multiracial Presbyterian church in St. Louis, paying special attention to white and African American relations. The chapter explores ways in which power was addressed through religious practice and discourse, such that power relationships and status became “reversed and redefined in ways that bring traditionally marginalized people to the center.”

Alvaro Nieves suggests that congregations need to actively research their communities, the ethnic diversity of their communities, and the sorts of special needs present among diverse ethnic groups, and custom design their congregational ministries to address such community needs. He provides a guided overview of resources available for this task. In doing so, he hopes to equip clergy and lay leaders in gathering information to develop responsive ministries within the context of a new American urban reality. This effort has its potential payoffs

in targeting real needs associated with real ethnic (often immigrant) communities. These are efforts that promote good stewardship by increasing ministry effectiveness.

Finally, a conclusion summarizes and reviews key findings of the book, pointing the way forward. Appendix 1 provides a historical timeline on key events in American history related to race and ethnicity, with particular focus on religious events and events referred to in this book. Appendix 2 provides an annotated bibliography of recent publications that may be consulted or read by those who wish to explore these matters further.

As these chapters make clear, human diversity involves tough issues of living in an imperfect “not yet” world. We are called to love our neighbors. It can take tremendous effort and sacrifice on all sides, as in situations of worship, and it may mean reaching out to those unfamiliar to us, or challenging practices or attitudes “of the world.” Sometimes, it may be hard to know what to do. Yet we continue to pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

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PART I

Thinking Critically about  
Culture, Race, and Color



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# I

## Race: Critical Thinking and Transformative Possibilities

*Jenell Williams Paris*

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

—Rom 12:1–2 NIV

### Introduction

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the Roman Christians were not living in unity. Though they were all believers in Jesus Christ, they were from different ethnic backgrounds; some were Jews and some were Gentiles. Their cultural backgrounds gave them different understandings of how to live as Christians in the Roman world. Paul's letter is, in part, an encouragement to these Christians to live in unity by putting Christ's ways ahead of their own cultural ways (Keener 1993, 438). In Romans 12, Paul writes that cultural patterns sometimes prevent Christians from discerning what is good, acceptable, and perfect. Christians today, like the early Roman Christians, need to think critically, sorting out what in contemporary culture is Christlike, and what is not. In this, the Holy Spirit must transform our minds, sharpen our discernment, and improve our ability to live wisely in the world.

Just as Jewish and Gentile cultural patterns were a basic part of the Roman world, racial categories are a pattern of our world, and

they demand conformity. All members of racialized societies are taught, both explicitly and by custom, to believe in race and live according to racial norms. God made humanity with rich diversity, but people made the categories with which we make sense of that diversity. Racial categories were developed to legitimate European imperialism in the early modern world, and they continue to pattern our world. This essay describes the origin of racial categories, and then analyzes ways in which they shape our minds and behaviors. Then, it encourages Christians to take Paul's admonition to heart, becoming critical thinkers and transformed citizens of the world.

## The Origin of Racial Categories

Most scientists today agree that "race," as an idea that people can be scientifically categorized in a taxonomy of distinct biological types or subspecies, lacks scientific merit, as Meneses explains in detail in a later chapter. Despite wide scientific consensus that race is not biologically legitimate, we continue to experience race as very real. We each know our own race, and we assess the race of other persons quickly, often subconsciously. Indeed, race is real, but it is a social construction, not automatically given by biology. Like "higher education" or "dating," race is an idea and a social practice that has a history. It doesn't exist in all cultures, but for those who use it, race helps people make sense of the world around them. It guides people in understanding their own identities, who they are like and unlike, and how to form or avoid relationships with other people. It also contributes to understanding, legitimating, and perpetuating social inequalities of the past and present.

The idea of race developed in piecemeal fashion, emerging first in sixteenth-century Europe, North America, and South America as an informal ideology that legitimated slavery and oppression of Africans and indigenous people. Later, in the seventeenth through twentieth centuries, scientists brought this racialized mindset to bear on their research, further entrenching race as a cultural concept by giving it scientific credibility. Because science is a powerful authority in the modern world, scientific racism helped shape the racialized worldview that is dominant in our world today (Caspari 2003; Smedley 1999).

Europeans began exploring and then dominating much of the rest of the world beginning in the fifteenth century, and they developed ideologies that explained and justified this new global order. Before colonialism began, Europeans had long known people of diverse body features and cultures through trade and conflict with Asians, Africans, and diverse Europeans. These encounters, however, were not racialized. That is, people did not explain human differences and the social order with race categories. Premodern Europeans most frequently used language, custom, region, and religion to define in-groups and out-groups.

Jamestown was the first established American colony, and its seventeenth-century beginnings provide insight into the development of race in the United States (Allen 1997; Nash 1992). British settlers first encountered Native Americans as helpful, but as the British claimed Native land for themselves, group

relations became increasingly hostile and violent. In addition, some British settlers fled their own colonies to live with Native Americans, increasing hostilities toward native people who lived in relative ease compared to European newcomers. The British began categorizing diverse native peoples as “Indians,” associating the broadly generalized “Indian” physical type with savagery, violence, and suspicion. Though indigenous body types and cultures ranged widely across the Americas, this new category called “Indian” lumped all native people together and associated them with negative traits.

Along with the motivation for taking indigenous land, the major impetus for race categories was related to labor and profit. Initially, English settlers in Jamestown assumed they would use other Europeans as indentured servants and workers, but this was not successful. In the first decades of the seventeenth century, the first people to serve as colony laborers were Irish, Scottish, and poor English people. These “surplus” and undesirable populations of the British Isles were shipped to the American colonies to provide labor. As plantation labor systems became more oppressive, these workers were sometimes able to run away and assimilate into other colonies. Because their language, culture, and appearance were similar to settlers in other colonies, it was difficult for plantation owners to control them. Plantation owners made a second attempt to develop a stable labor force with Native Americans. They also did not make ideal workers because they were sometimes able to run away, survive in the North American terrain, and rejoin their families. Even more important, Native Americans had not developed immunities to diseases carried by European domesticated livestock, and these natives died quickly (Mann 2002; Wilson 1998).

By the mid-seventeenth century, transport of slaves from Africa to North America became increasingly efficient, and Africans became more available for purchase by plantation owners. Africans made ideal plantation workers because many of them had agricultural skills, but even more important, their language, culture, and appearance made them relatively controllable. They could not run away to their homes, and they could not assimilate into other colonies.

This preference for African labor was institutionalized in custom and law. Within thirty years of Jamestown’s founding, color terms began to appear in colony legislation. For example, “negro” servants could be held for life, but not “whites.” Later in the century, “white” owners were forbidden from freeing their “negro” slaves. Later, physical punishment for “white” servants was regulated (leaving cruel punishment of “negroes” free from censure).

In Jamestown, color categories for human beings emerged gradually, as the need for the categories became apparent. Fundamentally, color categories allowed plantation owners to stabilize their labor forces, which provided economic and social stability to the emerging United States. Color, then, became a symbol for social status. A “black” was a lifelong slave, unworthy of political enfranchisement, and denied legal protection from physical abuse. “Black” symbolized savagery, ignorance, lack of intelligence, and an inability to live in a civilized manner. To most Jamestown colonists, this justified slavery. In

their view, God made “blacks” with culture and personality characteristics that warranted their enslavement. Indeed, in their minds, slavery might actually be good for certain races of people who would live in savagery if left on their own.

Racial categories emerged piecemeal throughout the Americas, with local nuances and meanings. They shared common characteristics, however. First, they lumped diverse people together with a color label. British Anglicans, Spanish Catholics, and other Europeans of various languages, religions, and cultures came to see themselves as “white.” People from Africa, with its hundreds of languages, cultures, and diverse skin colors and body types, were lumped as “black.” Second, these color categories were correlated with cultural meaning. “Whites” were viewed as civilized, intelligent, capable of self-government, and self-restraint. “Blacks” were seen as dependent, childlike, and lazy, thus needing slavery to provide order in their lives. “Asians” were viewed as intelligent, similar to whites, but also as crafty and devious. The meanings of racial categories paralleled the political and social realities of the day, as viewed from a European or European American standpoint. Still today, racial categories in the United States best fit people associated with European imperialism in this country—Native Americans, blacks, and whites. Others, such as Latinos and Middle Easterners do not neatly fit into American race categories. Latin Americans developed different forms of racial categorization than did North Americans (see the chapter by Pozzi), and Latinos have a broad range of skin color. Many Middle Easterners, though physically “white,” may be considered less than fully white because of their distinctive cultures. Indeed, North American race categories were not designed for these groups, but for those groups most intimately involved in America’s earlier history.

## Scientific

Racial categories were codified and given greater authority with science. In fact, many people today believe racial categories originated in science, but this is not the case. We have seen that race first emerged as a legitimization for colonialism, and developed informally through vocabulary, cultural norms, and legislation. Later, racially minded scientists formalized these cultural understandings, and race categories gained more credibility and authority. Beginning with the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, scientists developed modern ways of understanding the natural world. These scientific methods and perspectives were applied to humans, as well. Numerous and competing racial schemas were developed; in fact, scientists have never agreed on the number or names of racial categories. For example, Carolus Linnaeus developed a fourfold scheme of *Americanus*, *Africanus*, *Asiaticus*, and *Europeaeus*. Johann Blumenbach’s system had five races: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. J. C. Nott and George Glidden offered ten subgroups of Caucasians, including Indostanic, Nilotic, Teutonic, and Pelasgic (Nott and

Glidden 1969, 450). Others saw three, six, or even ten races of human beings (Gould 1981).

Though idiosyncratic, these scientific categories shared several characteristics. First, they made scientific the scholars' preexisting notions about "race" as a package of physical and cultural traits. Linnaeus's *Americanus*, for example, was described as "reddish, choleric, and erect; hair—black, straight, thick; wide nostrils, scanty beard; obstinate, merry, free; paints himself with fine red lines; regulated by customs." His *Europeaeus* was "white, sanguine, muscular; hair—long, flowing; eyes—blue; gentle, acute, inventive; covers himself with close vestments; governed by laws." The *Asiaticus* race was "sallow, melancholy, stiff; black hair, dark eyes; severe, haughty, avaricious; covered with loose garments; ruled by opinions," and the *Africanus* was "black, phlegmatic, relaxed; hair—black, frizzled; skin—silky; nose—flat; lips—tumid; women without shame, they lactate profusely; crafty, indolent, negligent; anoints himself with grease; governed by caprice" (Smedley 1999, 161). Scientists believed they could predict a person's personality, appearance, dress, and social structure by knowing that person's race. Scientists today, however, see that seventeenth-century prejudices influenced these supposedly objective findings.

A second shared characteristic of these scientific categories was that they were hierarchically organized. Not surprisingly, the white race, whether called *Europeaeus*, *Caucasian*, or white, emerged as superior. The unexamined ethnocentrism of scientists affected their results as they used the assumed superiority of their own way of life as the measure for other peoples and cultures.

Racial science continued through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with anthropologists, biologists, and others seeking to refine racial categories (Baker and Patterson 1994). While some of the categories are still in use today, others have fallen away. Of course, the impact of this scientific tradition is still evident today.

Third, racial science made racial inequalities appear to be natural and permanent. Such inequalities were said to be based on inherent differences between races in socially relevant abilities and characteristics. Scientific categories removed race from its social context, in which Europeans enslaved Africans, Native Americans died en masse, and later, Europeans dominated the political systems of most of the planet. Historic and social explanations for oppression and inequality diminished as "race" provided a nature-based explanation for why some groups of people dominate, and others are dominated. In this view, humans, like plants and animals, adapt to their environments. Those best adapted succeed, and the rest do not. Attributing biological origin to racial categories strengthened the categories by claiming that race and its associated inequalities were natural.

The final implication was the false correlation between race and culture. Skin color was perceived to be like a flag, alerting others to the culture and personality characteristics of a person. In this way, race was correlated with violence, laziness, intellectual abilities, political capacities, and spiritual tendencies. Because race is a false biological concept, however, it cannot predict culture. Scientists now