

Beyond the Problem of the Color Line

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Good morning. I am honored to be here today. I first visited All Souls only several weeks ago, coming here with my son Nicholas to hear Reverend Galen Guengerich preach, just before the Christmas/Hannukah/Kwanzaa seasons. I did not suspect at the time that the next time I visited I would have the honor of standing in the Sanctuary and talking to you about an issue that has so occupied my life both as a philosopher and as someone deeply concerned with the level and shape of our moral discourse and our treatment of our fellow human sojourners. So I am truly grateful, and I want to thank the conference planning committee of ARDC and my minister back at my Garden City congregation, Reverend Hope Johnson, for suggesting to the committee that I be considered for such an honor as this. May the Great Spirit that has given us all life shape my words so that they may serve the purposes of the day, be useful to you in your own conversations, and help us to find a way out of the sicknesses of our time – racism. That notion of racism being a sickness of our time – a description I will use throughout my remarks today – I take from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein; from a pithy insertion oddly placed in one of his notebooks. There Wittgenstein wrote the following:

The sickness of a time is cured by an alteration in the mode of life of human beings. . . . Think of the use of the [automobile] producing or encouraging certain sicknesses, and mankind being plagued by such sickness until, from some cause or other, as the result of some development or other, it abandons the habit of driving.

For Wittgenstein, the alteration in any mode of living went hand in hand with an alteration of language and human discourse, not only human activity. And what you will hear me say today amounts to an appeal that, in fact, we change consciously, rather than by happenstance, our mode of life and language to help us eradicate our present sickness, racism. That transformative work will require a different kind of challenge, a different kind of discomfort and a different kind of risk than those faced by Medgar Evers or James Farmer or Fannie Lou Hamer. It will be the work of *jihad* with ourselves and our own cultures, and not against mere thugs and principalities, and it will require an utter transformation of ourselves as requisite for the transformation of our world.

In his famous book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, WEB Du Bois, the renowned intellectual and Pan-Africanist, warned America, and indeed the world, that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line. There are various ways of interpreting what Du Bois meant by the construction “the problem of the color line,” but in its most intuitive interpretation - that the question of racial hatred and separation would be the major challenge of the 20th century, and perhaps especially here in America - we can only conclude that Du Bois was tragically correct. The problem of the color line - the racial demarcations between communities deemed White and Black, or perhaps better put, between White and Other - was the century’s domestic conundrum. I say conundrum because this “problem of the color line” was no singular or clear problem, or one that could be addressed with one or two simple remedies. The problem of the color line was and is a *syndrome*, a multi-faceted disease, to use the language of medicine. A syndrome that, while having some more or less prominent and exigent manifestations, carried with it a collection of other ills that needed and still need various forms of treatment in their own right. And the questions surrounding the treatment of

the multifaceted disease that was and is the problem of the color line created its own conundrums, leaving an invidious social puzzle that we are still trying to solve. We found, and are finding, that as we treat one ailment a cascade of moral and social questions arise about the impact and propriety of even the treatments. For example, we have wrestled with the efficacy and longevity of the race-based programs designed to remedy some of the social disparities between the children of the class that included slave owners and the children of the class that included the slave – the classes being defined largely in terms of superficial physical appearance.

We wrestled with the clash between the compelling demands of restorative justice on the one hand, and the demands of a law-like ethics that forbids, categorically, the provision of social goods on the basis of categories, like race, that we have claimed have no place in determining who gets a seat at the table of economy, politics, and education, to name but a few of the social goods for which we rightly lay claim. Then, there has been the question of whether the remedies for past injustice are best targeted, on the one hand, on those who suffer the most from its legacy – those “people of color” who are suffering from seemingly endless cycles of poverty and what the sociologist Emile Durkheim called anomie (social breakdown), or rather, on the other hand, ought we not focus the remedies on all “people of color” as all have a similar claim for assistance in virtue of the continued existence of something we call “White privilege” even if among them there are persons with considerable economic means. For, it is often rightly argued, that the scars of exclusion and the legacy of disenfranchisement and social negation still exist and plague, on a daily basis, the psyche and the spirit, not only of the poor, but of all so-called “non-Whites” (and for that matter, the children of Whites who are themselves mired in the muck of the actions of their parents and parents before them).

The various reparations movements – movements calling for a proper and non-perfunctory material and national response to the atrocities of slavery and Jim Crow – take the general disenfranchisement and social negation suffered by all people of color quite seriously. And so the voices of reparation clash with so-called pragmatic voices – some of which are well-intentioned, bearing concern about the result of ripping open wounds that are on the mend as well as about the charge to today’s public treasure, and hoping to move beyond matters of race as quickly as possible to forge a clear space for future generations so that they might not have to fight the same battles and hold to the same racialized identities that now plague the world. While at the same time other so-called pragmatic voices lack real sincerity and simply want to cover over past and present atrocities and misdeeds, respectively, or are themselves tainted with latent race hatred and the immoral disregard for even the very idea of reparation, preferring to instead see America as the bastion of White privilege and power, with a commitment to keeping it so and a cool and suspicious pledge never to sin again in the manner of their ancestors.

The conundrum of the color line - of the legacy of attempts to forge a social remedy to a host of diseases.

The conundrum of the color line has spawned other puzzling flora in the body politic. It has turned offended community against offended community at times. This is often how evil operates in the world. The debate concerning *desert* has been heard, for many years, between diasporic Africans of the Caribbean and those whose roots are in America. Who most deserves reparation and success in America? Why are American Blacks so unable to pull themselves up? Similar clashes and debates may be found in or from the Hispanic and Asian communities, so-called. Should newly arrived Asians benefit from the struggle and strides of ex-slaves, leaping over them in socio-economic standing by taking advantage of such things as set-asides and affirmative action which are the results of the struggles of others, while at the same time disparaging the sons and daughters of ex-Slaves for their lack of progress? And what about Hispanics from, say, Argentina or Peru? How do they fit into the present racial discourse and the attendant discourse regarding remedies? What are the proper classes of persons that the power of government must pledge itself to protect?

The problem of the color line. The conundrum of the color line.

And then there are questions of a different variety. Who is “Black,” after all? Who is “White?” In the face of the scientific invalidation of racial categories (there are in fact no races from a scientific point of view), these questions have taken on new meanings. We are no longer concerned with so-called racial purity, with who is best defined as quadroons or octoroons and so may best fall under one label or the other. The labels themselves have lost their logic. We can no longer talk about the equality of real types of people, Whites and Blacks, as though they are natural kinds like ferrets and falcons. The scientific pronouncement, the implications of which are still only feebly grasped by many in the public square, changes the rules of the discourse about so-called “racial equality.” The former language game and discourse of race and racism were derived from the history of a delusion, that the notion that there were inferior and superior human types that may be gathered under headings of race. But, to the degree it was every unclear, it is now certainly and scientifically clear that the ontological standing of so-called “Whites” and so-called “Blacks,” so-called “Yellows” and so-called “Reds” is precisely the same. And so today, just how do you talk about the equality of delusional human categories of Red, White, Black and Yellow peoples? Clearly, we must rethink the language of the remedy if the language of the disease has changed. And it will be the case, in my view, that the change in the language and in the discourse of race and racism will take us much deeper into the real and underlying pathology, with a much better chance of killing it at its root.

Do we not, in any event, want to hold to such ideas as “Whiteness” and “Blackness” - or for that matter “Yellowness” or “Redness” or “Brownness?” If so, what exactly do we do with them? There are those who argue that we are stuck with such racial categories, that our speech is replete with them, that the social harms can only be understood in terms of them, and the remedies can only cure when we take them into account. I think that this response and this reasoning displays a terrible failure of imagination and nerve, and an immoral willingness to play the evil hand that we were dealt, using its language and buying into its categories. It is like clinging to the Nazi word Arian to refer to Germanic people, or the ancient Greek word Barbarian to describe all non-Greeks. To do so is to remain complicit or to enable xenophobia and jingoism. Words matter, and language is the bearer of being.

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Is Teresa Heinz Kerry *really* an African-American? Or is, say, a third generation American or Brazilian woman whose features still resemble those most commonly seen on the streets of Shanghai in any tenable sense an Asian-American or an Aseo-Brazilian? Perhaps you are tempted to say that label would apply, by some logic at least that takes stock of physical appearance as a meaningful indicator, in some way, of identities. Then what say you to a third generation son of America or Brazil whose great grandparents hail from, say, London? Is he an English-American? And though he blend in so completely into the motley streets of Sao Paulo or Recife or Brasilia, speaking fluent Brazilian Portuguese with the accent of his region, speaking not a word of English; practicing Catholicism and having never even heard of the Anglican communion, shall we still insist that he hold a hyphenated identity, that he is *really* an Anglo-Brazilian? If you believe the hyphenation is apt for our third generation woman, why would it not also be apt for our third generation man? What’s the difference?

People take up positions on all these issues and questions. That they do so is not the issue. We are here not engaged in a survey of what is, but of what ought to be. Academic humanities departments thrive on tweezing apart these conundrums, finding ways to square circles, to reconcile in 800 page tomes stocked with academic jargon that which is patently irreconcilable or absurd. They spend their time playing with the meaning of such notions as Blackness, Whiteness, Jewishness, Irishness, authentic selves, inauthentic selves, and on and on and on, when the best response to the conundrum of race is to step completely out of the

present discourse and ask oneself what in God's name we are doing to ourselves.

The problem of the color line is the conundrum of the color line is the disease of the color line. Those that play by its rules rather than changing them often remain diseased themselves, as many of us here today remain diseased, including your speaker, who has not himself fully recovered from the nightmare of racial discourse and human separation. And so to our list of qualifiers for our color line, we must add the word insanity. The problem of the color line is also the insanity of the color line. We cannot truly address it until we first confess that we are carriers of the disease, even when we think otherwise. Although there are times when we must use such terms as Black or White, which are filled with meanings and histories which we must ultimately throw off, yet every time you address another as Black or White without a full consciousness of how you are using such terms, when you simply use them as short-hand, like racists and bigots have intended you to use them, you show that the syndrome is still alive and well. You have acceded to a demonic language of separation rather than turning to face it down and liberate yourself from the totalizing and evil effects of the categories of humanity that perverse people have unleashed upon the earth, upon us their children. When we use the words White and Black more than at those necessary times wherein we are describing a sad history, when we must acknowledge the evil human categories that society has forged, we are backsliding morally and spiritually. And language being the powerful carrier of Being and Spirit, the matter is not simply the trivial excising of a few words from our lexicon, but the use of language to CREATE a racial social reality from which we claim we would extricate ourselves. The question, How do we change our speech and thought habits? presents itself for sure, and that is part of the anti-racism work that I believe with all my being we must do, so that the language of future generations will hear such labels as Black and White with incomprehension. And that incomprehension will change the social reality of the future, and take humankind one small step forward toward what Josiah Royce and Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community. And in doing this work, let us recall that the larger and bold ground-clearing work performed by men like King was only a phase of an ongoing project of discovering our full humanity and our full capacity to love past all superficial lines of separation; that we see first and foremost the God within each brother and sister who walk the face of the earth with us. Our new phase will be less bold, more tedious, and no less crucial. It is the continuation of God's work in history.

Let me switch gears for a moment. I have discovered this nifty thing that I can do on my computer when I am building a page for one of my web sites – something I enjoy doing myself. I discovered one day that I can take an image – a picture – that I want to use to add some visual interest to the site and can make that image more or less translucent. I can choose from a menu of translucence options. At the one end of the spectrum the image can be made just about as clear as glass, allowing the visitor to the site to see right through it to whatever is behind it. At the other end of the spectrum the image can be made completely opaque, making it impossible to see what is behind it.

Now as I was playing with this feature on my computer, I noticed that one of the interesting abstract images I had selected was positioned over another image, which was that of a human being in sort of stick figure with no particular features discernable. As it turned out, as long as I kept translucent the abstract image that I had placed over the image of the man I was able to create a very interesting effect. I was able to use my new image, which was full of colors and interesting shapes, and still preserve the human image behind it. This created the effect of the human figure housed in a new rich environment of color and texture that wasn't there before. I noticed that the colorful abstract image that I overlaid on the figure of the human now looked cold and incomplete without the human figure, and that the human image likewise looked naked and displaced without its new surroundings of color and shape and texture.

We reason, Ralph Waldo Emerson tells us in his essay *The Oversoul* and in other of his essays, by analogy – and the things in the world are but shadows of the spiritual truths that it is our job in life to uncover. I got to

thinking sitting there in front of my computer. Let the colors and shapes of the abstract image represent culture – our government, our parliament, our Congresses and Diets, our antipasto and our baba gannoush, our baseball and our mahjong, our Nan bread and our caviar, our English, Portuguese, German and Tagalog; our pack mules and our Dodge Rams; our cotton candy and our honey suckle; our Hip Hop and our Gregorian chant; our Yahwehs, Great Spirits and Brahmas; our Taos, our Socialism and our capitalism. And suppose that each of these, depending upon where we find them, were made so totlizing and so all encompassing that the humanity behind them all was blotted from view. And suppose that instead of seeing a man or woman who professes the teachings of Mohammed or Lao Tzu, we see instead only a Muslim or a Taoist whose identities are submerged utterly beneath the practices of Islam and Taoism that the identity assumed is no longer human, but precisely Muslim and Taoist only. Suppose we reverse the reality and see not the man or woman professing his or her changeable truth, but the ideas of the Prophet Mohammed or of Lao Tzu as in some odd sense self-professed, merely channeled through the human hosts which bring the grand message – human hosts dragged along by the message as the slave is dragged along by his master, a mere object for that which is larger than herself or himself. In such a case, Islam or Taoism as “isms” blot out the fact that the individual has in fact given his assent to them if they are to have any salience for life at all. They in fact flow from the individual and not merely into the individual. Now replace Taoism and Islam with any other culture choice – for at some level all cultural possessions are choices – and you can see how you wind up with a Khrushchev promising to bury all Americans in Soviet nuclear ash, and how Afrikaners could defile the land of southern Africa and hide the achievements of indigenous peoples; how an American president could make native peoples cross freezing rivers with infants slung across their backs in what is known as the Trail of Tears; and how strange fruit can hang from trees across the southern parts of the United States, and some northern parts too.

What lies beneath all culture? Or maybe it may be better to ask, What lies above it? The liberal religious educator Angus MacLean (no relation - I think), as our own Forrest Church reports in *A Chosen Faith*, said that we are not merely the “bellhops of history passing the baggage of one generation on to another.” We have to unpack that baggage and make it our own, use what we need and discard the rest, albeit as respectfully as possible so as to honor the ancestors. Says MacLean “Culture makes it possible for human relations to bridge the grave, for individuals who are so short of days to live with a wisdom derived from the dawn of time. . . . But our job is not to worship history and culture like fetishes, but to feed them into our living, creative stream of personal life for spiritual and intellectual processing.”

But for lo so many thousands of years and even up to this day, we have allowed our cultural and political commitments to blind us to the humanity in the Other and, that same Other to be blind to our own humanity, a humanity hidden behind a double-veil of opaque cultural screens. Where our screen ends and the Other’s begins a line is drawn. The lines of culture and politics and ideologies can thicken to the point that the humanity that gives rise to them disappears. It is at that point that we can gas, napalm, burn, sanction, blockade, persecute, enslave, scorn, murder with little regard. The human being behind the mask becomes, after all, but a mere instrument of a foreign idea that is a threat to what we are, what we believe. Those among us who have strong provincial and communitarian predilections must beware. The love of one’s culture, like the love of one’s country, is no mere warm blanket of familiarity, or the mere eros of home that we see in movies like *It’s a Wonderful Life* or *The Wizard of Oz* and read about in books like the *Odyssey*. Dorothy can click the heels of dainty little shoes; but the Hitler Jungen klanged together the thick heels of jack boots longing not for a return to a peaceful Kansas, but a Volkish haven of people like themselves who were in their twisted view essentially superior to all other people. Our provincial predilections, like our predilections for the other pleasures of life, can be double-edged swords and must be managed accordingly. The salutary work of multicultural education and movements must also proclaim this truth, as the paving of the way for the valorization of one’s own history in a pluralistic society is recommended and celebrated. The love of home and of culture can slip, without warning or much notice or difficulty, into a Volkish

ethnocentrism and disdain for those who are not like us in speech, in appearance, in habits. That which is inside will find expression, as it did after 9/11 when Americans began to suspect as terrorists or terrorist sympathizers all people with Arab names or who had brown skin. Here I preach to the choir, but we cannot forget the dark mansions of even the well-intentioned and progressive human heart always ready to tempt us to hate, and in our hatred to sow the seeds of a future destruction of a shape that cannot be predicted.

To treat racism as an isolated social ill is to treat only a symptom of a much larger disease. We persons of faith and spirit must see past the symptom into the very heart of the disease. The European creators and purveyors of the modern notion of race -- people like Immanuel Kant and David Hume and GWF Hegel -- did so partly out of ignorance, but partly out of a malicious desire to place themselves at the center of the world so that they might dominate other peoples culturally and economically. What is at the heart of racism in its modern iteration is the need to not only assert one's culture over another's by pointing to its own so-called superior productions, its art and its technology and its religion, as did the ancient Greeks, but to assert one's ontological worth, that is, the worth of one's very being and body, over another's, thus sealing in reason and social order the hierarchical relation between the Better and the Worse, the Master and the Slave, the Chosen and the Expendable.

And so, my brothers and sisters, the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of lines -- lines *unboundable*, lines *opaque*, lines *impermeable*. The problem of the 20th century was merely a species of this problem, as I suspect Du Bois himself knew. And so if we would attack racism -- as well as classism and sexism, genderism and fundamentalism and Volkish placism at their roots, we must acknowledge that though we have a language and a place and a faith that we love, we as humans, as mostly spiritual in our natures after all, we must at the same time learn to be at home in the world, as spiritual and moral cosmopolitans, and run the daily gauntlets of discomfort and difficulty that that prophetic work entails. We must see the human essence through the opacity of all provincial commitments and not assent to a demand from anyone that they or we be seen as first and foremost a communist, a Muslim, a Black or a White. And so anti-racist identities are part of a spirit and a psyche that are ever suspicious of all the lines that we draw around ourselves and around the Other, or through ourselves or through the Other like slashes from a saber of separation.

When the eyes of the Spirit are our primary organs of sight, we will turn to one another in a room like this and see no Blackness and no Whiteness and Brownness and Redness. We will see the differences among us for sure, the glorious difference in skin and hair and shape, but we will not see those differences as pertaining to much at all that is significant to the life of Spiritual beings who dwell, to use the words of Forrest Church, in the Cathedral of the world. For that which is significant about each of us is learned through the spoken and written word, by action. We will certainly see skins the colors of which cover a range of hues, lips that are thicker or thinner etc., not because of race but only because of population genetics derived from millenia of inbreeding amidst ancient and shared cultures, and the same as to the eyes, and noses, and legs, and hair of our fellows. We are human. All our differences, let us be plain, can be removed through one nocturnal act with someone of another population. The resultant offspring is not a herald a new race, not a Mulatto or half breed or person of mixed race, but only the blending of what her parents had to give at the moment of conception. For regardless of the social conundrums of race and culture -- Black and White Yellow and Red are social constructions not just words or colors. And they are social constructions that we do well to eject from our social intercourse. And so the work of building an anti-racist identity, UU or otherwise, must entail the construction within ourselves of an anti-RACIAL identity and sensibility, and to help others out of the maladies of the syndrome that is the color line, the conundrums of racial thought and racial history to view themselves as neither Black nor White, but as defined by what they think, value and do, and worshipping the humanity and divinity that is the source of all thinking, valuing and doing.

When the eyes of the Spirit are our primary organs of sight – when you see, as moral and spiritual cosmopolitans, that the Kingdom of God is indeed in your midst – not even the content of the character is paramount to our ultimate treatment of our brothers and sisters. Yes, we must move beyond Du Bois and King in our thinking. For the content of the character has to do with, at least in large measure, one's ethical conduct in life and one's performance as citizen, spouse, friend. But the eyes of the Spirit don't concern themselves, ultimately, even with those things. The eyes of the Spirit see more. To evoke Emerson yet again, they see that higher reality in each person we meet on the street or the highway; the eyes of the Spirit peer upon something higher in each of us that sees past the labels we wear, the labels of race, tribe or party. They overlook them all and see them all as poor stand-ins for the woman or man who wears those labels, and that higher something sees the special, cherished human essence underneath, and even divinity itself – and as we meet and greet one another, as Emerson teaches us, “Jove nods to Jove” from behind each.

And so, throughout the remainder of our Conclave, do not, I would ask of you, do not discuss the matter of racism and anti-racism as though you were merely sociologists. Let the sociologists do that. Nor discuss them as though you were merely psychologists. Let the psychologists do that. Don't discuss them merely as matters of politics or of philosophy. The political scientist and the philosopher have that covered. No – attack them as people who see with the eyes of the Spirit, which are the eyes of Wholeness and of Full Humanity. Use the language of all the disciplines just mentioned, for sure. But go deeper, look closer, and reach higher. May our discussions here today bear much fruit, and may that fruit become food for our private and our collective thoughts. For that which is at stake is nothing less than a world free of reasons to harm and hate one another in the name of idols like race and extreme cultural commitments, those things that have nothing to do with our deepest desires, our greatest aspirations, our highest hopes to live in a world in which “kingdom consciousness” abounds. And the Kingdom is no less than a regime of brotherly and sisterly love that overarches every human endeavor and act.

Thank you, and Blessings.