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“Why is Obama America’s First “Black” President?”

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If you immediately answered “racism” to the question posed in the title of this paper, you are correct, but probably not for reasons that undergirded your response. Rather than presupposing that Barack Hussein Obama *is* America’s first Black president, the question challenges us to analyze why we so easily embrace ideologies that automatically disqualify the significant contributions that Ann Dunham has made to her son’s genetic makeup. Unless she birthed him through surrogacy, there is no reason why her ethnic identity should not have contributed to his.

Since the President identifies himself as “Black,” I’m sure some may think that this conversation is much ado about nothing. Nonetheless, as his pivotal speech on race indicated after the Clintons played the “race card” in the 2008 primaries, his willingness to identify with his Black spiritual father, the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, in no way diminished his connection to his Kansan kin that lovingly raised him. Interestingly, by identifying as “Black,” while not dismissing his White ancestry, the President implicitly acknowledges the reality of ingrained American racism. Covered by the White political establishment’s cloak of acceptability, he could have invented another term that would have complemented Tiger Wood’s “caucablasian” identity. However, having connected with the African-American community in his later life, he knew that

when the masses looked at him, they would never see his Kansan mother, but would always see his Kenyan father.

Race and White Privilege

The reality of Obama's parents' contrasting genetics and geography greatly complicates any attempt to neatly classify him into an "ethnic" category. In fact, from an etymological perspective, ethnicity has more to do with your geographic origin—your nation (*ethnos*). When understood in this light, it is not hard to see why some "African" tribes actually profited from the slave trade alongside the European slavers.¹ There was no automatic solidarity based on pigmentation. As far as they were concerned, anyone with a different language, culture, religion and physical features was the "other." In their minds, the Igbo captive was no different from the Australian Gabi-Gabi.

Although the success of European slavers depended on taking advantage of African ethnic rivalries, slavery and imperialism has created a type of interethnic solidarity that has forcefully integrated multiple ethnic groups into distinct hierarchical categories. In this hierarchy, Europeans are the ones who frame the language and apply the rules. Thus we find the twofold usage of the term "African"—which in itself is a European word that was first imposed on the "continent" during the Carthaginian wars. In one sense, "African" defines all those with certain

¹ On African involvement in the slave trade, see Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). The level of African involvement is disputed by Molefi Kete Asante, "Henry Louis Gates is Wrong about African Involvement in the Slave Trade," *Dr. Molefi Kete Asante* (May 6, 2010), <http://www.asante.net>.

physical characteristics that are manifested primarily in melanin and hair texture, and secondarily in body types and facial features. Second, “African” is used to define those who may have descended from someone with the aforementioned features.² In fact, an entire word group describes these “Africans”: mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, etc. These terms belong to the “one drop” racial doctrine that basically disqualifies a person from the White “race” if he or she has been “contaminated” with “African” blood.³

Conversely, the concept of “Whiteness” is also dictated by imperialist agendas. While in today’s society many wear the badge of whiteness with pride, one only has to look at the history of White America to see that there was a time when some European ethnicities were less welcome. The Irish, Polish and Ashkenazi Jews can all share stories of how life was before they were assimilated into “White” America. While not on the same relegated level as their African compatriots, they too were victims of a systemic discrimination that affected their access to certain lines of employment and housing communities. However, to their advantage, the similarity of their physical appearance to the oppressor class afforded them opportunities to escape with a simple legal name change. While prejudice and stereotypes still exist among Whites, it is no secret that most gain automatic passage into the club of white privilege through the simple rite of birth.⁴

² See Henry Louis Gates, “Exactly How Black is Black America?” *The Root* (Feb 11, 2013), <http://theroot.com>.

³ For a practical induction into the “one drop” theory, see Bliss Broyard, *One Drop: My Father’s Hidden Life—A Story of Race and Family Secrets* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2007).

⁴ For a discussion on the concept of “white privilege” see Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2011).

Interestingly, those who determine the rules of access will sometimes make adjustments to incorporate people in the club who may not naturally qualify on the basis of physical characteristics or ancestry. Some are probably familiar with the “white by law” racial classification in the Americas and other areas built on apartheid ideologies.⁵ This was available to those with quadroon or octoroon parents who were able to convince the courts that their “white” features had successfully diluted any trace of Black ancestry.⁶ Some may also be surprised to learn that the United States Census also defines White as, “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as ‘White’ or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian.”⁷

White Privilege and Adventist Identity

On issues of ethnicity and racial classifications, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has mostly conformed to societal norms. Rarely do we raise a prophetic voice which challenges the hierarchical categories that continue to buttress European dominance over every major global institution. Sadly, even if we did, our cries would only amount to “sounding brass and tinkling cymbals” because we are infected by the same malady. Eurocentric DNA is so ingrained in

⁵ For a discussion on racial categories in the United States of America, see Ian Haney López, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

⁶ There was an interesting case in South Africa documented in the movie “Skin.”

⁷ In one of her “Black in America” documentaries on CNN, Soledad O’Brien featured an Egyptian who considered herself to be African-American, but used her governmentally derived “White” designation to improve her chances of getting accepted into a university.

church structure that its presence is felt even when there is a semblance of indigenous autonomy. I am reminded of this reality whenever I visit Ghana's Valley View University and am greeted by the enormous profile of a Scandinavian "Jesus"; or when I sit in the Oakwood University Church and am surrounded by stained glass windows that depict a biblical world where none of the people look like the Black worshippers.

This is one of the reasons why I am wary of those who make simplistic calls for dissolution of "race based" structures. These idealists naïvely believe that our obvious racial problems will disintegrate when we all decide to assimilate into a new administrative structure. They passionately recruit voices for a utopian choir whose sole task is to bellow a stirring rendition of the feel good chorus, "Kumbaya." Unfortunately, they have failed to realize that our present reality demands that a hymn's chorus must first find its true meaning in the verses that provide its context. The verses in our hymn expose a system that reflects the racist inflexibility of the United States of America in which a core of influential white men dictate which items should be placed on the so called "democratic" agenda. So tell me, how can we join hands and sing Kumbaya in an atmosphere of inequity? How can we be serious about unity when somebody is still crying from the abuse she has received from her church—who will dry *her* tears?

The unwillingness to deal with the root issues is demonstrated in the aftermath of Dwight Nelson's 2015 MLK sermon provocatively titled, "Why I believe in the 1,000 Man March After Ferguson,"⁸ in which he channeled the radical spirit of the pioneers to call for an end to

⁸ <http://media.pmchurch.org/media/2015-01-17.mp4>.

“separate conferences and separate congregations.” This was followed by a change.org petition titled, “Let’s End Ethnically Separated Conferences.” The subliminal message in the original graphic could not be more ironic—a white hand reaching *down* to a brown hand. The name of the petition has since been changed to “Lets Unite in Christ,” and the suspicious image has been replaced with a less suggestive one. Further, the petition now contains an *explanation* that it was never intended to call for the dissolution of Regional Conferences. However, the fact that the racist implications of the original message were not even considered is evidence that we have still not dealt with the real issues.

As I shared in the Black History Month sermon at Andrews University Seminary in February, those who are truly serious about healing wounds caused by racism will not target the structures that have provided healing and refuge for those who have been abused and neglected by the larger system.⁹ Had it not been for Regional Conferences, who knows how many African Americans would have shunned the Seventh-day Adventist Church after the Lucille Byard incident? Without Regional Conference support, who knows how Oakwood University would have survived as the General Conference funneled the bulk of its education dollars to the two primary white institutions: Andrews and Loma Linda? Further, just in case anybody has forgotten, so called “segregated churches” existed before the formation of Regional Conferences and continue to exist in non regional conferences.¹⁰

⁹ “Black Lives Matter,” <https://www.andrews.edu/sem/sem-chapel/chapel-audio/2015/spring/02-10-15dr.keith.burton.mp3>.

¹⁰ Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Must We Be Silent: Issues Dividing Our Church* (Ann Arbor, MI: Berean Books, 2001), 408, misses this important fact when he suggests that the current structure encourages “separate houses of worship.”

Those committed to racial equity will focus their energies on dismantling the real obstacles to trust and cooperation. They will decry the race based ideology in the *Church Manual*, which demonizes jazz while the hymnal is dominated by melodies that are easily adapted to classical scores and European folk dances. They will denounce the dominance of race based Eurocentric biblical art that continues to psychologically enslave black and brown children. They will condemn the race based supremacist attitude that attempts to suppress celebrative percussion and movement in worship. They will address the race based Seminary faculty and the church funded scholarships that enabled their academic success.

Conclusion

One of the more bizarre racial stories this year featured Rachel Dolezal, the head of the Spokane chapter of the NAACP who was outed as “white”!¹¹ Although her features were obviously more stereotypically European than African, even those who worked closely with her were surprised to discover that she was not “black.” Society has become so conditioned to spot the “negro” that it was not difficult for her to convincingly live out her *alter ego*. The public response to her alleged deception was unmerciful. Some of the same people who weeks before had lauded Bruce Jenner’s transition to womanhood passionately condemned her and even accused her of mental illness.

¹¹ See Allison Samuels, “Rachel Dolezal’s True Lies,” *Vanity Fair* (July 19, 2015), <http://www.vanityfair.com>.

I was among the small camp of those who supported Rachel Donezal. I listened to the way in which she exercised care in responding to questions about whether she was African-American by saying, "I'm Black." Contrary to some African-Americans who have denounced their blackness, she had chosen to identify with the struggles of Black people. She may have appeared to be in too deep, but she had learned to empathize with those whom she so vigorously represented. I propose that we need more Rachel Donezals in the decision making levels of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. We need leaders who truly believe that black and brown lives matter and are willing to significantly alter the status quo. We may not be able to change the racialized language of society, but we can make positive differences in our church.