

Understanding ethnicity, racism and cultural integration: using theological tools to tackle racial problems.

Compreender a etnicidade, o racismo e a integração cultural: utilizar ferramentas teológicas para enfrentar os problemas raciais.

Comprender la etnicidad, el racismo y la integración cultural: utilizar las herramientas teológicas para abordar los problemas raciales.

Comprendre l'ethnicité, le racisme et l'intégration culturelle : utiliser les outils théologiques pour s'attaquer aux problèmes raciaux.

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Introduction

Since George Floyd died, we have seen “rainbow groups” (black, white, coloured and Asian people and Latinos) strongly speaking out against racism and protesting against police brutalities. This has been watched all over the world. These groups have been waving banners with the following words written on them: “Black Lives Matter”.

I am tempted to uphold with no mistake that we are in the presence of new social movements fighting for equal opportunities: the melting pot movements. Could we say that the lives of hundred millions of black people killed while fighting for their rights to exist during and after the colonial period will finally be honoured by these social movements? Could we say that the world has finally changed for better after George Floyd’s death? We hope so.

I think it is now or never that racial problems must be addressed and solved in America and all over the world. George Floyd’s death has opened the gates of solidarity, of fraternity and of humanity. I think it is an unmissable opportunity to address and solve one of the most shameful crimes of humanity: racism. Racism is a deplorable shame, a heinous crime and a diminishing sin “crying out in the desert”.

These last events have inspired me to reflect upon the concepts of ethnicity, racism and cultural integration and join the fight against racism with ideas and suggestions anthropologically and theologically constructed.

We are familiar with words like ethnicity, ethnic groups, ethnic conflict, ethnic minorities, nation, nationalism, refugees, asylum-seekers, immigrants and emigrants, racism, integration, adaptation... and so forth. Today, these words keep cropping up in the press, in TV news, on radio, in political programmes and even in casual conversations. Yet, many of us have to admit that the meanings of these terms frequently seem ambiguous and vague.

I intend to revisit the meanings of three terms: ethnicity, racism and cultural integration in this article. My aim is twofold - theoretical - to find a bearing in the vast body of anthropological literature, and instrumental - to arrive at fairly manageable definitions for the purposes of this article. These terms may conjure up ideas about identity, inclusiveness, pride, exclusivity and discrimination. They might also provoke resentment, anger, hatred or revenge. Should it happen this way, then, I should say, my reflection was not able to do justice to the double aim I have set up to achieve.

What is Ethnicity?

Ethnicity comes from the Greek word *ethos*, which etymologically means custom or distinction. It can be understood as the fundamental and distinctive character of a group, social context, or period of time. It expresses attitudes, habits and beliefs of that same group. However, confining its meaning only into this definition could impoverish what it still entails. Since the late 1960s ethnicity has remained a central focus for anthropological, political and social researches. For most anthropologists, ethnicity is a product of our social situations. It is made relevant through people's ways of coping with the demands and challenges of life within certain geographical and social milieus.

Basically, ethnicity has to do with the classification of people and group interactions. Erikson observes, by the way, that the word ethnicity in everyday language is often used to mean minority's issues and race relations. In social anthropology, however, ethnicity is understood as 'a relationship between groups, which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive.'

Of the writings I have come across exploring the socio-cultural features which distinguish one group from another, Manning Nash seems to present the most fascinating formulation. Five anthropological elements can be drawn out of what Nash called “the building blocks of ethnicity.”

The first element is the body. R. R. Grinker’s work among the Lese and Efe in the rainforests of central Africa presents a striking example of how the body enters into the dynamic of ethnic differentiation.

The second element is culture. Every person or every ethnic group possesses its own culture. By culture I mean a set of customs, norms, beliefs, values, contra-values and traditions of a given ethnic group.

The third element is language. Language is an essential channel for understanding a particular culture. Language gives a cultural identity to an ethnic group. For instance, English people speak English and they are named after it. The same thing could be said of the French, the Russian... and so forth. History, however, tells us of people who lost their language because of being economically or politically subjugated by other people. The strongest normally dictates the rules. African people are an example.

The fourth element is the place of origin. One’s country of origin is an identity. One is Nigerian, Irish and American primarily because one was born in Nigeria, Ireland or America, even though there might be cases where a person becomes Nigerian, Irish... due to adoption of citizenship, and not because of nativity.

The fifth element is religion. By religion I mean a set of values, customs, morality, beliefs that ‘purport to relate a group in a special way to the supernatural.’ Experience has shown that religion is a powerful institution. It can influence behaviour. A practical example, as told, would be that of a group of Ugandans who, believing that ‘the end of times’ was near, set fire on the house in which they were gathered to pray so that they could not see what was about to take place on that very day. However, nothing happened whatsoever. It is striking to hear that other believers, who could not be with these victims in the moment of this incident, felt in some way that they ‘missed the train to salvation,’ to heaven.

Another issue closely related to ethnicity has to do with race relations. The question usually asked is if there is some close link between ethnicity and race. There is not a simple answer to this question. However, a good number of social anthropologists would tend to agree on the fact that ethnicity is a cultural phenomenon, therefore distinct from the concept of race. A general argument put across is that race has a biological basis. Although it was for some time common to divide humanity into four main races, modern genetics tends not to speak of races.

Other social anthropologists would have some reservations about the existence of races. They have argued that from aeon there has been so much interbreeding between human populations and, for this reason, it would be meaningless to talk of fixed boundaries of races. For them, the distribution of hereditary physical traits does not follow clear boundaries.

Erikson, for instance, suggests that the concept of race can all the same be important to the extent that it informs people's actions. He continues by saying that, at this level, race exists as cultural construct, whether it is a biological reality or not. Erikson says that 'racism obviously builds on the assumption that personality is somehow linked with hereditary characteristics that differs systematically between 'races', and in this way race may assume sociological importance even if it has no objective existence.'

Now, we must ask whether there is any link between ethnicity and racism or the study of race relations should in this meaning of the word be distinguished from the study of ethnicity or ethnic relations. For Pierre van den Berghe the answer is negative. He regards race relations as a special case of ethnicity.

Others, among Michael Banton (1967) have argued for the need to distinguish between race and ethnicity. In Banton's view, race refers to the categorisation of people, while ethnicity has to do with group identification. He adds that ethnicity is generally concerned with the identification of 'us', while racism is more oriented to the categorisation of 'them.' From this, I conclude that ethnicity is not a fixed or static entity. Rather, it is dynamic and it is a continuous tension between the influences of traditions and the demands of modernisation. How does it relate to the concept of racism, then?

The question of Racism.

If someone called you racist, you would probably ask what that person means in fact. What does racism mean exactly?

The word racism stems from the word race, a social phenomenon usually experienced after a conflicting encounter between cultures or peoples. It refers to cultural and political prejudices or bias as a result of this conflicting encounter between two or more people or cultures. In fact, only human beings are known to be racist.

Racism is a striking experience lived and tolerated upon by many people, either as individuals or as groups. It is an experience that discriminates, excludes, separates and alienates a person or a group of people. For Robbie McVeigh, “racism is about racialized violence. This involves more than racist attacks on the street by individual bigots, and entails organised, structured, institutionalised violence.” McVeigh adds that racism is not about petty differences between individuals or nations, but about genocide. The lesson from the Nazi holocaust, but also from colonisation, is that the ultimate logic of racism is genocide, slavery and institutionalised violence.

The term racism denotes negative attitudes and practices towards peoples because of their membership to groups that are perceived to differ in physical or cultural characteristics from the perceiver. The starting points for such claims are beliefs that different races exist and that membership of a race makes a person innately superior or inferior. This idea is extremely powerful and dangerous. For instance, when Luther King fought against racism in the USA, he did not only have in mind a fight against the perpetrators but also against the ideologies that gave rise to it. But in the case of the Second World War, when Nazism explored the racial theories of that time politically, we all know what it led to: the GREAT Holocaust.

Like many other concepts, the concept of race and likewise racism have also acquired new meanings. In many cases, racism is also applied to signify the colonial impaired relationship between the ‘west and the rest.’ Before the enlightenment, the main ideological justifications for racism emerged from religious beliefs. For example, blackness had been equated with evil, ugliness, danger and sexual transgression. Black was the colour of the devil in a European folklore that drew upon encounters with the Moors. Subsequently, folklore racism became theologically refined to justify slavery and

colonialism. Claims that black people were inferior to white people could be asserted as truth on the back of religious beliefs. These ideas 'were' still being diffused up to recent time.

The anthropological inequality among races was also reinforced by science. Many scientific theories claimed that there was a hierarchy amongst races stretching from the ape-like 'lower races' to the more evolved and thus superior (white) races. I suspect that these and other prejudices have had an impact on the way black minorities and many white people relate to one another in the USA and elsewhere.

However, the terms 'race' and 'racial' were contested by a number of social scientists. Some French intellectuals, for example, have tried to remove the word race from the French Constitution in the recent past, claiming that racism is real, races are not. Although, there have been some effort to fight these and other theories, the fact is that racism is still an issue in America and Europe especially motivated by the huge number of immigrants coming mostly from Africa and Asia. These immigrants coming to Europe, especially black immigrants, have faced a serious problem of cultural integration into these various European societies.

Approach to the concept of Cultural Integration.

What is cultural integration? Why do members of a given ethnic group decide to immigrate to other countries? Does ethnicity have some impact on the cultural integration of ethnic minorities? What happens when cultural integration of small groups is challenged with ethnocentrism or racism from the ethnic majority?

In general terms, cultural integration can be understood as a dynamic process in which values are enriched through mutual acquaintance, accommodation and understanding. It is a process in which both the immigrants and their new compatriots find an opportunity to make their own distinctive contributions: cultural, economic, political, social and religious.

This concept of integration rests upon a belief in the importance of cultural differentiation within a framework of social unity. It recognises the right of groups and individuals to be different so long as the differences do not lead to domination or disunity

or even discrimination. For example, integration has brought to the United States both a strengthening of their population and a vital fertilisation of their cultures.

At least, three factors are important for a full integration of the immigrants: first, the predisposition of the immigrant to change; secondly, the predisposition of the receiving society to recognise differences; thirdly, the degree of stability or otherwise of the social-cultural structure of the hosting environment .

Some people decide or are forced to emigrate to a different ethnic environment, either because of the desire to change environments or then because of insufficient conditions of living in the country of origin. Ethnic conflicts or economic situation are also the roots of that pressure to migrate. Think of the “wave” of refugees and asylum seekers which have been mounting in the outskirts of London, Paris, Amsterdam, Dublin, Berlin, Rome and other major cities of Europe due to the wars and economic crises in Syria, Libya, Nigeria and Afghanistan.

Conversely, most European policies of cultural integration exclude these people because they are identified as culturally different and economically challenged and, probably, socially dangerous. Yet, the Universal Declaration on Human rights encourage those who are in danger of death for economic, cultural or political reasons to seek asylum in any safer environment. It stresses that all people are free to live wherever they might wish. Notwithstanding that, most wealthy countries pay little attention to what this Declaration has to say on this matter, even after subscribing to it.

Experience has shown that ethnicity can influence cultural integration of immigrants and emigrants negatively or positively in other social environments different from their own where they might find themselves. In the case of negative influences, immigration could become a hard experience for them. Ethnic conflicts (wars, discrimination, racism, etc) are likely to break out after the encounter between different ethnic groups, especially in cultural environments with little or no understanding of ethnicity and cultural integration as social values. I think that ethnic conflicts can only be mitigated if understood or solved within a theology that embraces and goes back to its divine roots. This remark has set the tone and is the core of this article. No anthropocentric policy will successfully fight racism unless it is theocentrically constructed.

Tackling Racial Problems theologically

My argument is that there has to be a theology that addresses racism. Racism is contrary to “Cosmos-views” and Eucharist seen as unity, communion and inclusion. If we want to be truthful to the Christian story of cosmic fraternity/sorority and inclusion, then it is important to recognise distinct ethnicities, accept cultural integration and denounce all kinds of discrimination, even when it demands great struggle. My claim is that racism is contrary to Cosmic Fraternity/Sorority.

Christians should know that we are descendants of the first created couple, Adam and Eve. This couple was created in the image and likeness of God. They are the first parents of humanity. Christians can call themselves brothers and sisters, firstly, because of Adam and Eve, and secondly, because of Christ. We know what happened in the beginning when Cain failed to recognise this divine fraternity. It led to the first human death: Abel. “Yahweh asked Cain, where is your brother Abel? I do not know, he replied. Am I my brother’s keeper? What have you done? Yahweh asked. Listen to the sound of your brother’s blood, crying out to me from the ground” (Gn. 4, 9-11).

This theological vision is sustained by Christ incarnation, through Virgin Mary (Lk 1, 26-38). Christ has come to redeem us all, men and women alike. “The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord’s year of favour (Lk 4, 18-19). In Christ, there is no longer a division between Jews and gentiles, between masters and slaves, between black and white, between East and West, South and North. All people are made sons and daughters of God. “Everyone moved by the Spirit is a son of God. The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out, Abba, Father! The Spirit himself and our spirit bear united witness that we are children of God. And if we are children we are heirs as well: heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory.” (Rom 8, 14-17).

This theological understanding of the World, as cosmic fraternity/sorority, has huge implications on how we address the issue of racism in the USA and all over the world. If we really believe in the Christian story, our attitudes to foreigners, refugees,

asylum-seekers, black or white people should be challenged and change radically. It is true that human slavery was theologically justified from the fourteenth century right up to the middle of the twentieth century. It is regrettable. However, as the world becomes smaller and smaller, especially with the coming of many ethnic groups together due to globalisation, we need to challenge all forms of discrimination that might pose threat to the Christian story of love and fraternity/sorority.

Holding a view or taking an action that is intended to diminish or exclude people because of their ethnicity, colour or place of origin is something abhorrently evil. It is the worst form of human rejection, because it is connected innately to a person's biological traits. In God, there is no physical discrimination. It is also, arguably, the greatest 'NO' someone can give to God, the Creator of heaven and earth, our Abba. We call it racism. All people are God's beautiful children.

Racism, whether it is institutional or otherwise, is an expression of a total rejection of what it means to be human. From a moral perspective, racism is a sin that cries out to heaven from the desert of a meaningless life and it is a blasphemy against the Creator of the Universe, who is Trinity, one God in three, a real communion of love. As I had the opportunity to address, today many black people, asylum-seekers and refugees are subjected to various forms of discrimination and racist slurs such as: "socially and economically doomed people" and "racially degraded people", etc. These attitudes must truly be a major concern for all World religions.

My own understanding of racism goes back to the ethnic conflict I experienced in Angola and Rwanda. Discrimination leads to violence and genocide. When oppression becomes unbearable, the ultimate logic of it is violence. This experience has shown me that ethnic conflicts cannot be solved easily and lazily, since the stigma attached to racial discrimination cannot be overcome so easily as well. It could last forever. Think of the conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis or between Tutsi and Hutus or even the conflict in North Ireland, and now of American racial related deaths (George Floyd's murder, especially)! These conflicts are clear examples of how discrimination can lead to unbearable violence and uncontrolled genocide.

For too long we have radically separated human beings from the rest of creation. This anthropocentric emphasis has had the effect of narrowing possibilities for people to cultivate deep earth-human relationships. However, Christians believe that the universe was created as a unity, as a communion. It is within this perspective that I suggest that all the churches in the United States and other places should be speaking to recreate and reinforce our human values.

I think that this recreation could be presented in the following way: ‘for in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the Cross’ (Col. 1:19 – 20).

With this conviction, our human species can become a little more humble, a little less discriminatory and hopefully better than yesterday. We will all be reborn, nourished, healed, and be more mindful of one another.

Conclusion

This has been a short anthropological reflection on racism as experienced by ethnic minorities. I have argued throughout this piece of work that racism is an obstacle and a challenge for cultural and social integration of such people no matter where they are found. This reflection was born out of the perception that many people ignore the conceptual basis of racism. It was also born out of the observation that ethnicity is a product of our social situation, because is made relevant through people’s ways of coping with certain geographical and social milieus. Likewise, ethnicity has to do with the classification of people and group relationships often leading to racism and ultimately to violence.

I maintain, therefore, that without understanding the basis of ethnicity, discriminatory racial attitudes will continue to be ignored in the USA and elsewhere. Clearly, the recent racial events in the USA were shocking to me, but not necessarily surprising. These events can be anthropologically and theologically understood as I have tried to show. Of course not all has been said.

As I tried to show, ethnicity itself constitutes a problem for anthropological study. How much more racism! It was important, therefore, to begin with a quick look at how some scholars have approached the problem. The short literature review presented yielded some theoretical tools to understand ethnicity, racism and cultural integration. It is a fact that black people do experience discriminatory racial battles on the streets, in the residential areas, in the restaurants, in the pubs, and so forth as reported. It is also conspicuous to notice that these are not only personal and isolated racial attacks, but also institutionalised.

Last but not least, I sum up with Irish ex-President Mary MacAleese's words: 'it is embracing the human dimension of immigration that gives rise to the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunities. That means learning to see refugees as fellow/sister human beings, as individuals each with their own story to tell. They are people who arrive here often frightened, lonely, bereft of possessions, perhaps unable to understand the language – sharing, in many respects, the experience of millions of our own ancestors. In saying that, the solution is not to romanticise them, but neither is to demonise them, holding them responsible for every ill in our society. The decisions we take now will lay the cornerstone for the shape of our future society...Assuming that responsibility requires us to use generously and well the opportunities we now have to use them to create a humanly decent and inclusive society – for refugee and native alike.'

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