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Born into New Modes of Existence

MARK WEATHERS

He is a barbarian, and thinks that the customs of his tribe and island are the laws of nature.

In John 3, a Pharisee, under the cover of night, approaches Jesus. He has the sense that this man, harangued by his fellow coworkers, perceives the kingdom of God with clarity his contemporaries do not possess. In John, this event immediately follows the cleansing of the temple, so Nicodemus must be bracing himself for Jesus' assessment of his Pharisaic identity. This controversial rabbi has dismissed the temple and its teachers as inadequate representatives of Israel's God. Later in John, Jesus will offer the temple's leaders such a scathing review that Nicodemus' fundamental loyalties, theology and institutional commitments must be called into question: "Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires" (John 8.43–44a).

Jesus lays claim to the same story and canon of these teachers but views their position of religious authority as contemptible self-glorification because they piously dismiss God's truth in their midst. These leaders count themselves in the proud heritage of the prophets but view their (the prophets) vitriolic condemnations as a proper evaluation of a national disobedience long dead. In reading the Synoptic Gospels, we must recognize the treasonous nature of Jesus' routine resurfacing of these figures to condemn a present waywardness that has changed its form and content but is not a vanquished remnant of past infidelity. Concretive idols have been smashed to bits, but intangible idols of self-understanding have taken their place.

It is in this context that we must understand Jesus' incendiary invitation to be "born from above" (John 3.3b). Nicodemus has been born once, honorably so, into a privileged place constituted by esteemed national and religious identity in God's chosen nation, wherein faithfulness and justice have been promised for all. Yet Jesus seems to suggest there is insufficiency in this identity and necessity for abandoning it. For Nicodemus to be reborn is more than a cultic cleansing at a fount of amniotic waters. An umbilical lifeline must be cut because the nourishment it channels no longer sustains life. Sustenance from the safe and secure institutional womb of national-religious aggrandizement will be disrupted before a shaking and traumatic entry into a new, blinding landscape where old modes of being are eradicated. Nicodemus must be born again.

Nicodemus presents himself to Jesus as open, willing and (arguably) humble. Yet he seems unable to accept this invitation into a new chapter of God's history with humankind because he suffers from a type of existential cataracts. His mind and heart lack the acuity to recognize that the organizational vessels that possess Nicodemus' allegiance will not be the chosen intermediaries between a righteous God and an unrighteous humanity. This is a tearing exodus Nicodemus is being called to, and we must be sympathetic. Journey through this birth canal is a jarring detachment from a delicate religious and political safe house that has been unveiled as insubstantial for authentic life. Nicodemus must decline Jesus' summons because the claim that life up to this point has been only a false reality is too hard to accept when it has been the conventional condition of both vision and security.

J. Kameron Carter, Associate Professor of Theology and Black Church Studies at Duke University Divinity School, spoke about baptism and racial identity in his lecture “Whiteness as a False Reality: the Baptismal Identity of ‘the Now, but Not Yet.’”¹ First Carter speaks of the ways in which baptism served as an exodus from a comprehensive self-understanding for black Americans.

Their identity was no longer founded on the blackness that white enslavement created, the blackness that provided the labor for constructing the material reality we call “America.” For each of them, Jesus Christ was more than an idea. As Very God and Very Man, Jesus was for them understood to be a social reality, indeed, a social field with historical depth across time and geopolitical breadth across space, a reality that reconstitutes all relations inside of the social space that he is. Baptism inducts one into the social reality that is Jesus of Nazareth, but only by “exiting” one from the confining social realities that whiteness has created.

Carter’s theo-sociological consideration of baptism for whites is timely. Quite recently, I found myself on a church van, shuttling towards a mission trip site. I heard two adults in the front, both my father’s age, conversing about Jeremiah Wright’s statements about the United States. I was preparing myself for an instinctive and fiery dismissal of any rhetoric highly critical of (what might vaguely be defined as) “The American Dream.” And it was here that I was faced, once again, with a more enlightened form of prejudice, inherited from our white grandfathers, which has undergone some generational adaptation for survival in our current milieu. This new strain has done rather well because its issue has less to do with melanin and more to do with social class, an appraisal of American history and the current state of our Land of Opportunity. White racism (from my vantage point) is now more socio-economic in its sensitivities than biological. I believe that few white Christians see blacks or other minorities as inferior on the basis of their raw genetic makeup. Instead, it files the (admittedly) combative Wright on a shelf, somewhere in between *Mein Kampf* and the conspiratorial net musings of Roswell UFO theorists. Surely, Wright has a way of pumping hostility into social commentary that might otherwise be taken seriously.

“Class envy does not help anyone in this life or in the next. Blaming others for one’s own sin and guilt will not solve the problem. We must take responsibility for what we do in life instead of blaming ‘the man’ for our failures and woe,” writes net apologist Robert Morey in response to Wright, who according to Morey has produced a theology “which enslave(s) the black man and keeps him poor and angry.”² Though Morey’s word choice would be caught in the political correctness filter of the average Caucasian, I count his general posture to be representative of my local church member.

From this view, the angry black theologian is living in the past and is digging up the long buried phenomena of prejudice, discrimination and inequity. He lacks gratitude for white America, which has acquiesced to Martin Luther King’s (now realized) “I have a dream” speech with righteous subordination. The average middle class person is not likely to pull up statistics from the United States Census Bureau which chart the grossly disproportionate figures on minority poverty, unemployment, violent crime or lack of education. But if presented with these numbers the diagnosis of the data would be clear and self-evident: they are the product of vice, pessimism and apathy, manufactured by a “certain class” of minorities (“certainly not ‘all of them,’ that would be a stereotype”). The suggestion that these social ills are perhaps the runoff of a still lopsided society and market system would be scoffed at, only degrees away from deluded Jihadist rhetoric. An American history textbook would quickly silence this subversive hypothesis.

Near the end of a chapter labeled “The 70s,” the historians’ camera lens pans across a national, ideological cemetery where once rampant social phenomena were put to death. Slavery, anti-Semitism,

1. J. Kameron Carter, “Whiteness as a False Reality: the Baptismal Identity of ‘the Now, but Not Yet,’” (class lecture, Duke University, January 12, 2005).

2. Robert Morey, “Truth About Black Liberal Theology,” Research & Education Foundation, <http://biblicalthought.com/blog/truth-about-black-liberal-theology> (accessed October 21, 2007).

segregation and gender inequality all have a plot here. In the camera's view we see tombstones labeled "Institutional Prejudice," "Discrimination" and "Racial Inequity." These characters had a closed casket service shortly before the turn of the 80s (later events suggesting otherwise are understood as anomalous). Presumably, those in power beat these social pandemics ruthlessly, with constitutional severity. The narrator's voice, however, will not address rogue claims that no one was ever put in the coffins, or that the very pallbearers at this funeral service were the allegedly deceased. The pallbearers were reportedly dressed in the fine garments of liberty, systemic equality and blind justice, contrary to sturdy assertions that these emperors had no clothes. This is the national self-understanding that frames a white commentary on racism and discrimination which, to most, are simple phantasms conjured up by an irresponsible few to scapegoat those in power for what they have rightly attained and maintained.

It is this new form of prejudice, one that decries bigotry, but is blind to any complicity to the structures and systems that nourish it, which looms as the greatest enemy to racial reconciliation in Churches of Christ and Christendom in general. Blacks and whites might share common space on Sunday mornings but, when it is time for the Church to be the Church, addressing the particularities of our world in a responsible way with the gospel, those in the pews will quickly find that their visions of the world are irreconcilable and mutually implicating. To simply have potlucks with once segregated congregations is not a vision of unity with substance. The dividing wall of space and time might come down, but only to reveal an ideological trench that has taken its place.

White evangelical Christians assume that the current mission of the church is to return America to its traditional righteousness of yesteryear (one predominated by orthodox sexual responsibility). Judeo-Christian language can be publicly displayed in the public square, acknowledged in textbooks and by cashiers in the marketplace. This white myopia is a cultivation of class, market loyalties and economic conservatism (a market-endorsed arena of social Darwinism) that rails at any voice that questions the fairness of life in God's nation. This prejudice is socio-economic as much as it is racial, for it consecrates the American statesman John Hay's view that having property is simply evidence of work ethic and planning, while poverty is nothing but "a judgment on your laziness and vices or on your improvidence" because our nation is a "moral world: which it would not be if virtue and vice received the same rewards."³ This schema of the moral universe thereby sacralizes the disproportionate social preeminence of most whites in our country, thereby (tacitly and with a self-effacing lack of gusto) approving of the paltry place minorities hold in our country's work force and educational institutions. If whites are not at least open to a damning critique of this status quo sacralization, any attempts for racial reconciliation in our churches (or any church) will be facile and short-lived.

The onus is on Caucasians to consider our baptisms anew from the position of Nicodemus. We must recognize the wrenching quality of this exodus, in which an attempt at vicarious participation with poor minorities will require that blacks and Hispanics be our liberators. We bear the chains of unquestioned and fundamental loyalties, whitewashed theology and institutional commitments that must be called into question. Concretive institutionalized idols blessing racism have been smashed to bits (and that's up for contention). But intangible idols of ideological self-understanding have taken their place. We must find forums in which white Churches of Christ can confess that our prejudice has changed its form and content but is not a vanquished remnant of past infidelity. Radical social dislocation is the only method for removing us from a safe womb in which we are the rightful inheritors, stakeholders and beneficiaries of a fiscal-political ascendancy that needs to be put on the stand by scathing prophets in our own time (they're not hard to find).

In the essay "Race, Religion, and the Contradictions of Identity: A Theological Engagement With Douglass's 1845 Narrative," Carter writes that ultimately baptism is being "bound inextricably in Christ

3. William Rosco Thayer, *Life and Letters of John Hay* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 6–7.

to the destinies of other nations and their sense of peoplehood. Indeed, this sense of ‘co-peoplehood’ or ‘inter-nationalism’ is theologically rooted in the unfolding of Christ’s existence in history . . . towards the kingdom of God.”⁴ In this way, when the rich young rulers of privileged Churches of Christ leave their accumulated wealth behind to open up shop in new corners of our American landscape, we must see it only as a beginning. A step in which a community of believers say “there is no white, black, Mexican, legal citizen, illegal immigrant, American or foreigner.” Until we set roots into the most broken human contexts of this country and world, allowing ourselves to be born into new modes of existence that implicate all of our allegiances and securities, anything we claim about racial unity will be feeble, unimportant and devoid of crossbearing. How to do this crossbearing will look different in every context, but if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we need only find those communities our national systems have left crucified.

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4. J. Kameron Carter, “Race, Religion and the Contradictions of Identity: A Theological Engagement with Douglass’s 1845 Narrative,” *Modern Theology* 21, no. 1 (2005): 55–61.