Defining “Racisms” in a Globalized, Terrorized, Ecologically Threatened World

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Introduction: The Idea of “Race”

Human beings are “hard-wired” to distinguish differences (Monteith and Winters, 45). Thus, there is a perennial need to assign meaning to those differences distinguished among fellow humans and then, to act accordingly (Manier). However, “race” is a relatively new idea that has signified a variety of things, depending on the historical period and context. For decades, it has been widely agreed that there is no scientific basis for setting any absolute boundaries that determine the inferiority or supremacy of any one group of humans over another (Harding, UNESCO 1959, 1951, 1964, 1967). Scholars concur that prior to the thirteenth century B.C.E. “race” simply indicated distinctions of difference (Hopkins, 131). However, especially from the medieval period, through the Age of Discovery to Catholics and all anti-racists must become more sophisticated in their analysis of racism and the dynamics of its 21st-century manifestations.

Albert Memmi’s work is an excellent resource toward that end.
the Enlightenment, “race” took on increasingly more connotations of a deterministic classification of humans in hierarchies of superiority. Developments in defining “race” in Europe, China, and Japan likely had the most extensive impact, and taken together, those ideas established the basic framework for the major constructs of “race” and racisms around the globe and across time.

In the early sixteenth century the term “race” (“racial stock” as in breeding animals) entered the vocabulary for describing traits of human beings; a fatal step toward deterministic interpretations of difference (Fredrickson, 53). The characteristics distinguishing different “races” grew to include: skin color, eye color, types of hair, customs, language, religious beliefs, and more. In the racist mind, these determined whether or not a people was “civilized” or qualitatively equal to those making the judgment. Thus, when we speak of “race” we are dealing with a “social construct” that takes many forms (Davis, 307–42).

From the eighteenth century to the present, three prototypic and ethically egregious systems for interpreting the human differences stunted human life around the globe: (1) U.S. chattel slavery; (2) South African Apartheid; (3) Nazi Aryan White supremacy. These systems crossed a line by legally establishing racism in the structures of the entire societies (Fredrickson, 1–6).

From Race to Racisms: Definitions and Dynamics

The most adequate definition of racism for the twenty-first century is given by Albert Memmi. He holds that racism is fundamentally a structure and a set of social relations, not only a feeling of prejudice toward an “Other.” Racism is a generalizing definition and valuation of differences, whether real or imaginary to the advantage of the one defining or deploying them [accusateur], and to the detriment of the one subjugated to the act of definition [victime], whose purpose is to justify (social or physical) hostility and assault [aggression]. (Memmi, 100)

Further, Memmi claims, the archetype of this oppression is colonialism (more follows).

Memmi distinguishes four moments that, when occurring together, constitute an absolute and timeless occasion of oppression called racism (xviii). Racism is first an instance in which one recognizes that a “difference” exists between persons or among groups. Secondly, a negative value judgment is imposed on those persons who bear or manifest certain characteristics and who are different, and a positive valuation is given to the correlative characteristics born by the one(s) providing the judgment. Thirdly, the difference and its value are generalized to an entire group, which is then depreciated. And finally, the negative value imposed on the group becomes the justification and legitimatization for hostility and aggression.
Memmi has shown that racism has no real content and therefore it can change at the will of the oppressor. Indeed, it is not the nature or the kind of difference that matters; only that a negative difference is perceived to exist. “What counts is the form, the self-approbation that emerges from the assumptions and disguises inherent in any negative valuation of the other group” (xix). It is illogical that racism can be only a personal matter because to make a generalization requires the presence or consideration of a group; thus, racism is a social matter. Racism as a social system relies on its ability to define the “Other.” The act of definition requires the exercise of the power of one group over another. The fact of definition sets up a dependency of the dominant on the “Other” for their own social identity and on the hostility engendered by that dependence. Only legitimization of the dominance as a relationship provides any semblance of content.

Critical for understanding racism in its many forms is to see the integration of the biographical, the historical, the personal, and the analytical in the mind of the racist. Memmi defines racism in two senses. In the “narrow” sense, racism is the focus of biological difference or specific traits that are given to devised paradigms called “races.” Biology (or the criterion given for the discriminating category) acts as a pretext or an alibi. The function of racism is “both the rationalization and the emblem for a system of social oppression” (Memmi, 92).

Racism in the “broad” sense is self-valuation through the devaluation of the “Other,” and the justification of verbal or physical assault or abuse. Racism in the “broad” sense is more prevalent than it is in the “narrow” sense. As Memmi explains: “It would seem reasonable to consider biological racism, which is a relatively recent phenomenon, as a special case of the other, whose practices are more widespread and much older” (94).

Memmi and others also warn of the danger of an illusional insistence that the reality is that there is actually no difference among peoples (See Omi and Winant, 117–18; Bhattacharyya, Gabriel & Small, 28–59, 125–26). He cautions that some psychoanalytic theories “affirm that racism is built on heterophobia, a fear of difference, of those who are different, that is a fear of the unknown. But the psychoanalysts ask, ‘What is this “unknown?”’ and, they respond it is our own unconscious, which is frightening because it is strange, and we wish to project it on others” (Memmi, 43).
Clearly this and any other purely theoretical approaches avoid dealing with the concrete realities of human differences that do (at least initially) spark discomfort because they are unknown to us. Heterophobia—fear of difference, or xenophobia—fear of strangers, are each rooted in particular concrete experiences and contexts. Any “cure” for such fears needs to be dealt with in equally concrete and experiential ways. One deeply embedded myth, strongly reinforced by Western education, colonial and slave mentalities, is that it is bad to be different (Memmi, 45). This stance makes neoliberal “color-blind” approaches to resolving racism in the U.S. and the xenophobic violence involving immigrants in Europe and elsewhere fully plausible (See Omi and Winant, 117; MacMaster, 193–208). It would thus be a huge mistake on the part of any anti-racist effort, particularly by the church, to stress the universal without also acknowledging the particularity of differences that exist among all peoples. The real task for the church is not only to assist people in developing their intellectual capacity, character, and spirituality, but also to teach them the skills and strategies necessary to draw on “difference” as the occasion for empowerment of all and celebration of the presence of God's grace in all people, rather than as the basis for fearful exclusion or even violence.

**From Race to Racism:**

**21st-Century Color-coded Racism, Tribalism, and Xenophobia**

In light of Memmi’s definition, today three forms of racism require greater attention, namely color-coded racism, tribalism, and xenophobia.

**Color-coded Racism**

Color-coded racism is most viperous in that it presents the criteria for the inferiority of the “Other” in biological and phenotypical terms such as skin color, bodily shape, cranial structure, negroid, caucasoid, or mongoloid. Through a process of racialization, one group (the white majority, for instance) targets the “Other” as inferior, formulating a mythical or ideological construct to support and provide rationale or justification for legal, social, political, and unjust discrimination and oppression (MacMaster, 2). The particular characteristics defining inferiority or superiority are indelibly stamped into the very body of the “Other” and thus, cannot be changed through any form of assimilation into the “superior” way of being or culture (see Douglas, 2005).

**Tribalism or Ethnocentricity**

Tribalism names a form of racialized relations between ethnic groups. A tribe is “a social organization or division comprising several local villages, bands, or lineages or other groups sharing a common ancestry language, culture, and name”
A general sense of belonging that comes through membership in a tribe or some group is necessary for human well-being. But tribalism is the attitude and practice of harboring such a strong feeling of loyalty or bonds to one’s tribe that one excludes or even demonizes those “Others” who do not belong to that group. This exclusion is manifested in engaging or failing to engage with the “Other” in obtaining the necessities of life, education, employment, just and fair governance, healthy political and economic relations, membership in social and religious groups, or equitable opportunities for rising to positions of authority or leadership.

Tribalism or ethnocentrism is a universal human tendency rooted in the reality that people are most comfortable with those familiar to and like themselves. However, rooted in their common humanness, people prosper and thrive best in a way of life that allows all groups to sustain themselves within a stable social, political, and economic order that supports human dignity. The legacy of colonialism is the deep disruption of such systems among those colonized.

Significantly, colonizers needed to justify their overtaking the property and persons of those they conquered. Justification required demonizing tribal peoples, exaggerating any conflicts among them. The most common technique used to gain control (of often powerful groups) was that of “divide and conquer.” The colonizers’ most egregious practices were to arm one tribe, set that group up against their neighbors, and then employ them to “catch” their “enemy” and sell them to the slave traders. Their eliminating one group or favoring another over against the “Others” was a genocidal activity.

The effects of this damage live on in the post-colonial world in many ways. The most devastating effect that has plagued newly independent nations is division remaining among peoples that threaten formation of any positive cohesive national unity. Tribalism and ethnocentrism infect all aspects of life with corruption, graft, incompetence, and injustices, resulting in a general sense of distrust and disenfranchisement among all citizens. Such an unstable political situation when combined with dire economic poverty has frequently been volatile—even to the point of genocide as in Rwanda and Burundi (1994).
Xenophobia

Literally, xenophobia means “fear of the stranger” (from the Greek, xenos = stranger or foreigner; phobos = fear). A fitting definition is:

. . . a somewhat vague psychological concept describing a person’s disposition to fear (or abhor) other persons or groups perceived as outsiders. Xenophobia may have a rational basis to it, such as when it refers to a worker whose job is threatened by the intrusion of migrants whom he labels as outsiders and therefore fears. It may also take an irrational form, for example when someone fears Sikks because he or she believes they carry knives for use as potential weapons. But to call a person xenophobic does not necessarily say anything about the rationality of that condition. Nor does it entail examining the underlying causes of their disposition. (Cashmore, 346)

Xenophobia is so lethal because (rational or not) it is easily manipulated and fueled toward mass hysteria that can fling even the most levelheaded and altruistic persons into aggressive oppression of the “Other” (MacMaster, 190–91). Evidence for this development is found in emerging political parties: the French Front National, the Dutch Centrumdemocraten and the Centrum Parj, the Austrian Freiheitlichen, the German Republikaner and Deutsche Volkunion, the Belgian Vlaamis Blok and the Front National (Voster, 7). In the U.S. in 1989, a well-known Klu Klux Klansman, David Duke, ran as a Republican and won a seat in Congress (see http://www.davidduke.com/index.php?p=350).

Three interrelated phenomena have combined to feed xenophobia and xenophobic behavior:

. . . the skillful elaboration and diffusion of a “New Racism” that offered a powerful ideological revision of traditional biological racism; the concurrent emergence and electoral challenge of xenophobic “National-Populist” parties that made use of the new current of thinking on cultural racism and national identity; and lastly, the tendency of the “New Right” conservative parties, as well as socialist and all mainstream parties, to play to the same gallery, particularly through the construction of “Fortress Europe” and the scapegoating of refugees. (MacMaster, 192)

The “New Racism” plays on latent xenophobia by lauding the importance and the natural necessity of cultural difference. A typical statement of the proponents of this position is: “I’m not xenophobic, nor does the fact that I like the French and France best mean that I hate foreigners or hate other countries” (MacMaster, 194). Here the vocabulary of “culture” is the code word for the language of “race.” Antiracists’ efforts toward affirming the values of cultural diversity and creating “multicultural societies” are manipulated to exaggerate and emphasize the impend-
ing loss of a comfortable predictable homogeneous society. These manipulations are supported theoretically using Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci's claim that the state depends on material force, economic relations, but also on a cultural hegemony enforced by controlling people's worldview through managing ideas, language, and their discourse, and thus creating meaning (MacMaster, 194). The “New Racism” supporters also rely on sociobiology, reasoning that certain ways of doing things are right because they are natural, and if they are natural they must be true. Such reasoning argues that people live in particular countries just like fish thrive in certain habitat or wolves live in packs.

Further support is garnered by claiming that the ruling hegemonic majority is a “victim” of the disruptive invasion of the “Other” and the support given those invaders by the “race relations industry.” This victimization is often proclaimed and popularized using cartoons showing ordinary citizens being battered by “the loony leftists,” “fanatic liberals,” or “radical teachers.” When the media is flooded with this new vocabulary, racism is recast in populist “common sense” terms that plays to those who experience themselves disenfranchised by the governing “elites” who control the society, and thus made more reasonable and palatable (MacMaster, 195–98).

The xenophobic national populists were able to gain ground in electoral and parliamentary systems by focusing on this strategy (above). They gave an “acceptable face” to their biases and strategies as the “reasonable right thing to do” to protect national identity and culture. They offered strong, simply stated solutions to two basic fears held by the hegemonic majority: (1) the loss of power and control due to the influx of vast numbers of immigrants and refugees of various colors, religions, and cultures from all over the globe into Europe and North America; and, (2) anxiety about the threat these movements posed for keeping the “old wealth” secure. These solutions were to be accomplished via mainstream political involvement.

Ambiguities among the mainstream political parties in Europe and North America made it easier for xenophobic ideas and actions to take hold. The complexities of the new issues brought about by globalization, immigrants, and refugees caught the mainline politicians without a vocabulary and a plan to address these issues in a popular commonsensical manner. Thus, conventional politicians found themselves

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Xenophobia . . .

a somewhat vague psychological concept describing a person’s disposition to fear (or abhor) other persons or groups perceived as outsiders.
in a defensive posture that required compromises and self-preserving strategies to “get tough on immigration.” Numerous harsh draconian measures were passed on both sides of the Atlantic to limit immigration and fortify national identities. Many formal declarations about combating racism were brilliantly paraded, but they were weak, rarely enforced, and effectively utterly symbolic.

The Complicity of the Church and the Idea of Race

The Catholic Church’s record concerning the ethics of power and racism, tribalism, and xenophobia is at best mixed. Across history, the actions of church leaders ranged from the biblical prophetic to the near demonic when they and lay Christians yielded to the pressures of their contexts and lost sight of the deepest convictions of respect, equality in Christ, justice, and charity (see Panzer). Just as today, the degree of compliance by Catholics with magisterial teaching varied widely. Indeed, it is the stories believers tell rather than their knowledge of papal teaching or even doctrines that express their appropriation of the Christian faith in their personal lives, and that are most influential for their moral actions (O’Connell, 116–27).

Thus, it is imperative that the church and its ministers not merely impart doctrinal and dogmatic condemnations of racial injustices of the past but also proactively engage the faithful in experiential learning toward preventing racism’s sinful violence, now and in the future. The challenge for present-day Catholics and all people of good will is to learn from the past and honor the victims by not repeating the oppression. While never denying the horrific complicity of the Catholic Church in oppression, slavery, or genocide, significantly and ultimately the official church held a line in favor of its ideals on at least two counts.

First, the church constantly returned to its fundamental position that each human person is created in the image and likeness of God and that each person bears an inviolable dignity that must be respected at all cost. How this foundational principle was interpreted in relation to those understood to be “Other” frequently had more to do with the current cultural and scientific understanding of the human person than theological tenants. Also, the influences of Greek dualism on Christianity allowed tolerating slavery, providing (cf. Philemon) there was a harmonious spirit of charity between masters and slaves (see Frillingos).

Secondly, the church held that in Christ, all persons were redeemed and redeemable. Doctrinally, the Incarnation and the Cross placed no one beyond the bounds of salvation. Thus, early Christians, influenced by their contexts and cultures drew distinctions of difference, but they did not practice racism as we know it (see Hannaford, Thompson, Snowdon, 1983). For example, Greeks allowed that barbarians could be civilized; Romans believed all slaves could be emancipated; and Africans could be converted as was the Ethiopian (Acts 6:26-39). Space here is
insufficient for an adequate examination of divergences from these liberating interpretations of human difference. But certainly, especially today, the church cannot rest on its ancient laurels.

**Facing the Diagnostic Dilemma**

In 1988 the Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission issued its statement, *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society*. It defines racism as “rooted in the reality of sin . . . awareness of biologically determined superiority of one's own race or ethnic group with respect to others, developed above all from the practice of colonization and slavery at the dawn of the modern era” (#2). The commission then distinguished nine forms of racism:

- Exclusion and aggression (#8)
- Institutional racism (#9)
- Victimization and genocide of Aboriginal peoples (#10)
- Religious and ethnic discrimination (#11)
- Ethnocentrism or tribalism (#12)
- Social racism against the Third World (#13)
- Spontaneous racism [xenophobia] (#14)
- Anti-Semitism (#15)
- Artificial procreation and genetic manipulation (#16)

This document signaled a tremendous advancement in the church’s willingness and capacities to not only denounce sinful practices, but to also utilize social analysis and to act concretely to affect social, political, and economic change (#24–32). Still the emphasis is clearly on the conversion of heart: “Racial prejudice, which denies the equal dignity of all members of the human family and blasphemes the Creator, can only be eradicated by going to its roots, where it is formed; in the human heart” (#24).

Thirteen years later (2001) the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace issued its *Contribution to World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance*. This document affirmed the 1988 statement, but went further to tackle the need for reconciliation for past injustices (#7–12). Additionally, it focused on the need for teaching the values of human dignity, solidarity, and the common good in a variety of ways (#13–17). Significantly it supported concrete affirmative action (just opportunity) to mitigate past injustices and the denial of opportunity to peoples across the globe (#18–19). The church
also recognized the changing shape of racial injustice due to globalization and the unprecedented numbers of migrants and refugees in the world at the start of the new millennium (#20–22).

Returning once again to Memmi’s work, it is critical that the church takes heed of his wisdom as one who has uncovered what he calls “the discriminatory didactic” of the spiraling dynamics of racism: fear, followed by aggression, followed by more fear and aggression. Racists are fearful people. Underneath all racism, according to Memmi, racial affirmation is an instrument for negative self-definition that compensates for the feelings of personal vulnerability that accompanies fear. Indeed, racism in the “narrow” sense is easily defeated on its own weak logic. But racism in the “broad” sense requires the ability to generalize and in order to generalize, according to the skewed logic (illogic) required by racism, one needs support from a society and its structures. Memmi forewarns: “The relative structural coherence of racism in the narrow sense, even in its obsessive aggressiveness and self-interest, is confirmed precisely by the existence of racism in the broad sense” (Memmi, 96).

Thus, it cannot be stressed strongly enough, that if the church is to be effective in combating racism, and establishing racial justice, it must remain vigilant and deal with structural sin as well as personal sin; it must challenge oppressive social, economic, political, and sexual structures that frame the very world in which it would have “conversion of heart” take place. The church must not only proclaim doctrines and theological or moral principles, but also engage in training and forming moral agents who can critically analyze concrete realities in light of the Gospel and view differences as gifts and as positive opportunities. As Bryan Massingale showed in his classic analysis of U.S. episcopal teaching on racism between 1990 and 2000, how racism is defined, analyzed, and diagnosed will also determine the judgment concerning what action is required to overcome it (Massingale, 700–30). Shamefully, his judgment is correct that out of some twenty teaching documents on racism promulgated in the ten-year period (1990–2000), only four adequately defined racism as both structural and personal sin, and addressed concrete corrective actions.

Most significant about recent Catholic moral teachings on racism is that their very existence robs racism of any ethical legitimacy. But more fundamentally,
while requiring a spiritual base, they stipulate that much can and must be done to also create a just structural arrangement within which integral conversion can happen. Bishops’ conferences (e.g., England and Wales) across the globe have issued pastortals in recent years that even set out “in house” policy changes to model necessary structural changes. Individual bishops (e.g., George, 2001 and Hughes, 2006) also began to deal directly with issues of “white privilege” for the first time. More magisterial action like this is necessary if racism is to be fought and overcome in our globalized world. But ultimately, it remains for all people of good will, but especially Catholics animated by the Gospel, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and empowered by God’s grace to proactively fulfill the deep yearning of Jesus: “... That they all may be one...” (John 17).

References


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