

White Supremacy
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
May 21, 2017

The words “White Supremacy” were not particularly bothersome to me until some voices tried to bring it close to home, into Unitarian Universalism. In the course of the controversy over hiring practices at the UUA which has led to the resignation of our President and other top leaders, many of our brother and sister congregations had teach-ins on white supremacy in the UUA two weeks ago. I was already going to preach on it, but I did decline to style what I’m doing a teach-in – that’s so 1970s. But I’ll try to leave some time for discussion this morning.

To me, white supremacy has a specific historical meaning, which is deeply tied in to the tragedy of American racism. It is well-expressed in the two readings I gave from just before the Civil War.

Yet I find myself conflicted if not confused. I resist the term white supremacy as a description of those stubborn pockets of covert racism which continue to inhere in our hearts and in our beloved institutions. Yet in looking back over these two months, I was surprised to find that at an early stage of the current controversy, I myself adopted this term.

Clearly the idea of white supremacy did not stop at the Civil War. The war resolved the issue of slavery, but the idea of the inferiority of blacks has certainly persisted in American society

The task of trying to integrate the former slaves into the economy and society of America was the task of Reconstruction, which came to a halt when white supremacy reasserted itself politically and the federal troops were withdrawn. There followed Jim Crow and the loss of black voting rights, gerrymanders, the use of the criminal justice system to keep blacks in slave-like conditions, and the terror spread by the Ku Klux Klan. Thomas Nast’s 1874 cartoon on the cover of the Order of Service well captures this unholy alliance.

All these ways of maintaining white political and economic dominance can fairly be called expressions of white supremacy.

A few weeks ago, I preached on William Barber’s book the Third Reconstruction, about his Moral Monday movement in North Carolina. Barber maintains that the first Reconstruction followed the Civil War, the second was the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, and the third one is happening today. We might fairly say that a conservative movement arose in response to the Civil Rights movement and parts of that are white supremacist. Certainly white nationalists have been a scary part of the political influences in the current national administration.

But that does not account for the accusation now being made, that the UUA is a white supremacist organization because most of its top staff is white.

To me, this is a different kettle of fish. No one at the UUA is asserting overtly that people of color are inferior; to the contrary, all the actors in the drama now playing itself out assert that a greater racial and ethnic diversity in hiring is a goal to strive for. The UUA is officially committed to trying to transform itself into an anti-racist organization. With the adoption of our First Principle, it would seem that we could not be a White Supremacist

organization if that term encompassed the kind of blatant ideological racism that it did in history.

We have witnessed in the last six weeks a resignation of the UUA president, the chief operating officer, the director of congregational life. Three distinguished UUs of color, one of whom is a past president of the Association, have stepped forward to accept appointment as joint interim Presidents to try to oversee some changes in the hiring system before we elect a new President in New Orleans in June. And the Moderator and Chairman of the Board, Jim Key, who guided much of the response to these crises, has now stepped away from his position because of a major health crisis that looks like it will claim his life.

This dizzying sequence of changes was all engendered by one hiring decision in March. Scott Tayler, former co-minister in Rochester NY and a friend of our own Naomi Turner, and who has preached in this Meeting House, was charged as UUA Director of Congregational life, with hiring a replacement lead person for the Southern Region. The UUA is in the process of consolidating its geographical sub-units from about twenty districts into five regions. Most of the regional leads were drawn from the old District Executives, most of whom were ministers and all of whom were white.

District Executives are like firefighters; they are only needed rarely, but when they are, the need is intense. They are called in to deal with congregations in crisis. The skill set needed to be a good District Executive is a slow fuse, a lot of self-knowledge, and a good ability to communicate.

In this particular hiring for the Southern Regional lead, Scott Tayler hired a white male minister named Andy Burnette, from Arizona, and did not hire a Latina church administrator from Virginia named Christina Rivera. That was in mid-March of this year. Rivera learned that Burnette had been hired as she was attending a retreat in Baltimore for UU professionals of color called Finding Our Way Home. Rivera and Burnette are both members of the UUA Board of Trustees, which are volunteer positions.

Rivera told her fellow conferees publicly at the retreat that she had been passed over for a white male minister, and released a statement saying that this showed a pattern of white supremacy. In the statement, she said that Scott Tayler had said that the deciding factor was “trying to get the right fit for the team.” Rivera’s assessment in her statement was that this concern with “fit” allowed for white supremacy to enter into the hiring decision.¹

Rivera attached a chart to her statement showing that the highest division of UUA staff, the executive, had a total of 14 employees in 2014 and 12 in 2015. Of these there was 1 black and one Hispanic employee in each of those two years, which meant that the percentage of whites at this highest level was 86% in 2014 and 84% in 2015. That 86% white figure was about typical of all the other categories of employment except the service workers, where African Americans predominated.

I have litigated employment discrimination cases in my law practice, and I know that a case of discrimination can be made by statistics. Usually you compare the racial breakdown of the company with the racial breakdown of the “relevant work force,” the larger pool of potential employees from which those hired are drawn.

But there’s the rub. If I am thinking of suing an accounting firm for race discrimination,

¹<https://uuchristinarivera.wordpress.com/2017/03/27/on-being-a-good-fit-for-the-uaa/>

and find that the accountants in the firm are 90% white, 10% black while the section of the city where the firm is located is 60% white, 40% black, I might think I have a case, but I'd be missing the relevant statistic. Everyone hired at the firm has to be a CPA, so the relevant question is what percentage of CPAs within commuting distance of this firm are black? If it turns out that only 5% are black, then the 10% black CPAs in the firm is actually an overrepresentation.

In the case of the UUA staff, I don't know what the relevant labor pool is with which to compare the racial breakdown of the staff, but I expect staff is drawn largely from UU congregations. And my experience with UU congregations is that people of color in the pews are rarely more than 5%. We don't seem to have really accurate statistics, but a survey by the Pew Center indicates that the racial breakdown of "Unitarians and other liberal faiths" as of 2014 is that we were 78% white, 5% black, 1% Asian, 9% Latino, and 8% other and mixed-race.² We have for comparison the figures from 2007, in which the same group, "Unitarians and other liberal faiths" were 88% white, so we have declined a full 10 percentage points in our whiteness over seven years. If you want to call the predominance of white people in the congregations or on the UUA staff "white supremacy," white supremacy is losing its grip in both arenas.

But I agree with Peter Morales and with the interim co-Presidents: we can and should do better. If we take the First Principle seriously, we need to be trying to combat racism at every level of society, and certainly it would help to have our own house in order. I support the efforts to hire more people of color at the UUA. But I would like for there to be realistic metrics on this.

Now I stop and ask myself, is my disagreement with the specific claims on this hiring arising out of my white fragility or defensiveness? Well, maybe, but I think that we all want to move forward together, and avoid unnecessary fights. Perhaps it is I who am picking an unnecessary fight over this term white supremacy, but it strikes me as ahistorical. We already have white privilege, covert racism, institutional racism, unconscious racism, all kinds of words to describe a way in which people of color keep getting disadvantaged despite the announced good intentions held by people like me.

But Christina Rivera did not just pick this term out of the blue; it has been used in Critical Race Theory for decades to describe the systemic ways in which oppression persists, consciously and unconsciously.

Peter Morales issued a statement in early May noting that, while he could not talk about the hiring decision directly because of confidentiality, he could say that the narrative being promulgated about it was false. Christina Rivera posted a rejoinder to Peter which said this:

"in talking about this specific hire we are talking about patterns of white supremacy in the UUA. 'The narrative of the event which triggered all of this' has been 400 years in the making and more specifically for UU's has been decades, not simply the events of March 2017. That Peter cannot, or will not, see this says everything about the differences in our qualifications to lead."

Rivera's 400 year comment is true but not relevant: I recognize and fully accept that people of European ancestry took this land from the indigenous inhabitants, and enslaved

²<http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-family/unitarians-and-other-liberal-faiths-in-the-other-faiths-tradition/>

Africans to work it for them and developed a whole false theory of race to justify themselves and have maintained themselves in power over the centuries. Perhaps the decision of Scott Tayler to hire Andy Burnett over Christina Rivera for the position of lead of the Southern Regional Office of the UUA was in furtherance of that pattern, but I am not convinced by what I have seen so far or am likely to see, given that the principal decision-makers are still bound by confidentiality.

But I am not sure that matters. The three interim co-Presidents have not endorsed any specific version of this central event, but have talked in terms of getting on towards the Beloved Community. I can endorse that too.

Scott Tayler said he understood the affirmative action policy of the UUA to be that where there was a fully qualified minority candidate for a job, that candidate would be hired, and he said he followed that policy in all the hiring decisions he made, including this last one. He, of course has resigned now as well, and there will be no occasion to test whether his claim is true.

I have never met Christine Rivera, and have no idea whether she was fully qualified for the job she applied for as she claims. With two other people helping her, she has done an admirable job taking this employment setback and turning it into a teaching moment for the whole Association – over 600 congregations have conducted teach-ins. She remains on the UUA Board and will serve as Treasurer in the upcoming year.

In the end, my own discomfort with the term white supremacy doesn't really matter. Early in the crisis, in late March, I had signed my name to a letter expressing concern at the hiring patterns, and on re-reading it, I still agree with its sentiments:

“The ongoing dismantling of white supremacy in our system is difficult. It requires a reimagining of our own culture and an openness to the myriad ways marginalized peoples will challenge the status quo. But, there is a grace found in our willingness to disassemble generations of assumptions found in white culture. It is in this process we might find our greatest joy and the deepest fulfillment of the promise of our faith. Unmasking white supremacy lurking in our system and within ourselves is a necessary first step toward our shared liberation. Without it, we continue to live in the stagnation of white dominance.”

No, we are not back in the pre-Civil War days of overt and explicit racism, but neither have we moved completely beyond it either. My prayer this morning is that we can move forward together, black and white, Latino/a and Anglo and Asian and LGBTQ and old and young, to do the great work to which we are called. I will be interested to hear your reactions after we have taken the morning offering.

Amen.

Readings for White Supremacy

Opening words.

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

Sermon reading:

Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott decision, 1857:

“[Blacks] had for more than a century before [the union of the American colonies] been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect, and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic whenever a profit could be made by it. This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race. It was regarded as an axiom in morals as well as in politics which no one thought of disputing or supposed to be open to dispute, and men in every grade and position in society daily and habitually acted upon it in their private pursuits, as well as in matters of public concern, without doubting for a moment the correctness of this opinion.” 60 US 407 (1857).

Alexander Stephens, Vice President of the Confederate States of America, Corner-Stone speech March 21, 1861.

[The U.S Government was founded on the equality of all people]

“Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.”

Stevens went on to assert that the inferiority of the negro was based in science, and that science would one day get around to proving its truth:

“Many governments have been founded upon the principle of the subordination and serfdom of

certain classes of the same race; such were and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature's laws. With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system."