

Is Racism America's Original Sin?

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Twice in public speeches in the last year, the President of the United States has referred to "America's original sin." The first was in Charleston SC in June at the eulogy for Rev. Clementa Pinckney, pastor of Emanuel AME church and one of the eight from that church killed by the bullet of a man who seemed to hope his act would start a race war.

The President, speaking from the pulpit of a black church about a murder which had happened in a black church, extolled the black church as an institution of worship, of comfort, of community and of justice-seeking. He then said he didn't know whether the killer was aware of this rich history. But he knew that his violent act was one in a long tradition of violent racist acts.

"It was an act that drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches, not random, but as a means of control, a way to terrorize and oppress.

An act that he imagined would incite fear and recrimination; violence and suspicion. An act that he presumed would deepen divisions that trace back to our nation's original sin."

President Obama did not specify in that speech what was the nation's original sin, but in December he made another speech on the 150th anniversary of the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, which outlawed slavery, and said, "the scars of the nation's original sin are still with us today."

For purposes of what I have to say today, it doesn't really matter whether the original sin was slavery or racism. In the history of this country, each supported the other. We could say both.

Scientifically, there is no such thing as races of humans. There is one race, the human race. The idea that the human race is divided into subsets is what we call a social construct. It is one which has a long and sorry history which works to the disadvantage of millions of us.

President Obama was not the first President to link slavery and original sin. Our opening words in this service were those of President Lincoln, in his Second Inaugural, who, after four years of bloodshed on a scale never seen before or since, wondered aloud whether that terrible war was God's punishment for the sin of slavery, and whether it would continue "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword."

UU's generally don't buy the idea of original sin. Yet we don't want to deny that racism, slavery's legacy, is still active in our world today, that we are still judging people by the color of their skin rather than the content of their character.

The first permanent English settlement in North America was in Virginia, at Jamestown in 1607. The first colonists found it very hard going, and many of them died in the first years. Twelve years after the arrival of the first colonists, a Portuguese slave ship was brought to Jamestown, having been captured in the Caribbean with a cargo of 50 African men, women and children on board. These were soon put to work in the fields.

It is not clear that these first Africans were treated as slaves, perhaps more like indentured servants. It was common for Europeans who wanted to resettle in the New World to become indentured for a term of years in order to repay the expense of their passage; after they had

served the time, they were free.

Slavery is not indentured servitude, and the difference is illustrated by the first clear case of slavery, that of John Punch. Punch, an African, had deserted his labor in the Jamestown colony and run away to Maryland with two Europeans who were indentured servants. All three were recaptured, and the Virginia Governor's Council in 1640 decreed that the punishment for the two Europeans was to have their terms of indenture lengthened, but that Punch was to remain at labor for the rest of his natural life. American slavery is often said to date from this decision.

Incidentally, DNA testing has recently shown that John Punch is an eleventh-generation grandfather of President Obama on his mother's side.

But let's return to slavery. You can draw a straight line from the John Punch case to Dred Scott in 1857, the decision by the US Supreme Court that black people, whether slave or free, had no legal rights which the law was bound to respect. The law thus undertook to treat people of African descent differently than those of European descent. Africans were not indentured; they were held to service for life unless freed by their supposed owners. Legally, American slaves were chattel, pieces of property just like cattle. They could be bought and sold, and while the law did not allow them to be killed with impunity, it allowed and often encouraged them to be beaten. And the South developed a system of agriculture which depended on their labor.

Now some will say the basis of American slavery was moral wickedness, refusal to recognize slaves as humans, and that is part of the story. Another part is that the economy of the nation, north and south, came to depend on the institution of slavery. It is natural for those who have invested in a form of wealth to want to protect that investment, the source of their wealth. We see this in our own time: those who have invested in dirty capital such as tobacco or fossil fuels, will spend vast sums of money to cast doubt on whether that product is really harmful to the public. The slaveholders in the Nineteenth Century were trying to protect that goose which had laid the golden egg for them time and again.

That's a brief overview of slavery. Now what is original sin? It stems from the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent in the Garden of Eden, the second of the two creation stories in the Book of Genesis. Now the first thing to say about this story is that it is found in the Torah, scripture sacred to the Jews, but the Jews do not read it the same way that the Christians have read it. Original sin is a Christian idea.

We know the story. God told them not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil or they would die. But the serpent told Eve she would not die, so she ate the fruit and gave some to Adam. After they ate the fruit, they discovered they were naked and covered themselves with fig leaves, but this was a dead giveaway to God, who quickly wrung a confession out of them, and sentenced serpent, Eve and Adam to various punishments.

That's the Genesis story in a nutshell. In its text, without the gloss Christians later put on it, it explained why humans were mortal, why there were two sexes, why life was so hard for each, and how good and evil were something you had to open your eyes to see. That is, there were states of being in which humans could not see good and evil, and went around with no clothes on as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Fast forward to St. Paul. Paul is trying to argue to Jews and Gentiles in the First Century that Jesus of Nazareth, who was executed by crucifixion a few years earlier, was the promised Messiah. The problem with that was that the Jewish hopes of the Messiah were that he would throw off the Roman yoke of oppression, and this man clearly was defeated by the Romans. So

Paul casts Jesus as a spiritual warrior, and proclaims him the new Adam. “For as in Adam all die, so even in Christ shall all be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15:22) Adam made a big mistake for humanity thousands of years before in Eden, but Jesus’ death on the cross would atone for that sin and all the others committed in the meantime.

Three centuries later, St. Augustine takes up this suggestion in Paul and expands it into the doctrine we call Original Sin. Adam’s act in disobeying God is sort of like the Big Bang, whose background radiation is still reverberating in the universe. We can’t escape the clutches of sin. Every human being partakes of Adam’s sin, Augustine says, and this will condemn most of us to hell. The only ones saved are the ones on whom God arbitrarily bestows grace. We all deserve eternal punishment, and most of us suffer it. Even babies and those who have never heard of Jesus

will go to Hell when they die.

The grace which saves some from eternal damnation is not earned; there’s nothing you can do to buy it. It has to be dispensed from God out of God’s mercy.

Augustine’s system gets taken up by John Calvin and becomes the basis on which our Puritan forebears came to these shores. In the first Great Awakening in Eighteenth Century New England Jonathan Edwards was a great proponent of Original Sin, and was working on a defense of that doctrine at his death. But he recognized that it was an uphill struggle, for the whole story was at war with the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment favors knowledge. Knowledge is a good thing. Eve was the first theologian, she wanted to know about good and evil. How can we base the damnation of the human race on a bite of knowledge?

UUs are an Enlightenment faith – both American Unitarianism and Universalism sprang from the Enlightenment, the movement which gave us modern science and the industrial revolution, the enthronement of reason and the disenthronement of supernatural powers. We do not buy original sin.

Thandeka, a person who only uses one name, is a Black UU theologian, minister, scholar and activist who has taught at our Meadville Lombard seminary. She delivered a paper at the 1999 General Assembly which was critical of the UUA’s anti-racism effort at the time, called the Journey Towards Wholeness. She examined a book which the UUA has used in its anti-racism training by a Lutheran pastor, Joseph Barndt. Barndt himself had actually done some training for the UUA. Thandeka found the book thoroughly soaked in orthodox Christian ideas about original sin and summarized it thus:

“ Barndt insists that whites will always remain sinners because their nature is corrupted. They are thus slaves to what Barndt calls – and again I quote him verbatim -- the ‘original sin of racism.’”

We do not go to confession. Particularly on our Universalist side, we reject the idea that there ever was a Garden of Eden, any state of perfection from which humans have fallen. We reject Calvinism’s insistence that humans are inherently depraved, beyond redemption. On our Unitarian side, we assert that we have moral agency. We don’t wait for the grace of God to fall upon us, but actively seek to accomplish our own salvation, however we want to define that word.

And yet, it is a gut feeling with me that we as a nation and particularly we who have constructed for ourselves an identity as White people have constructed as part of that identity a

good deal of blindness to our history and to the everyday snares and tangles encountered by of people of color. I don't know that a Calvinist confession is needed, but maybe some mindfulness, some enlightenment, some ability to put ourselves in the shoes of another. Our Universalists forebears believed that most of what we call evil springs from ignorance, if everyone was better educated the would not be so much wickedness.

Now it is tempting to say that since racism was here in America at the beginning of English settlement, that it supported and was supported by the institution of slavery, that, as we will see in the film we'll show this afternoon, slavery persisted for decades after the Civil War, that racism persisted through the Civil Rights movement and persists down to this day, that it is somehow part of our constitution, sort of like original sin is for the orthodox Christian. But I reject that idea. Racism is still with us, but it has changed character.

Arthur Miller's play "Incident at Vichy" (1964) is a powerful drama among several strangers who have been rounded up by the French police, cooperating with the Germans, for reasons unknown. In the course of the play, the people in the waiting room are called out one by one by the Nazis, and most of them do not return. The last remaining are a Jewish psychiatrist from Vienna and an Austrian prince who was not Jewish. Earlier, when they had first met at the beginning of the play, the prince had asked the psychiatrist if the latter knew his cousin, a baron. The psychiatrist had dodged the question. Now, when the stakes had gotten higher, the psychiatrist told the prince that it was his cousin who had purged all the Jews from the medical faculty, leaving the Psychiatrist to abandon his work and go into hiding. As the prince starts to collapse from guilt, the psychiatrist hisses, "it's not your guilt I want, it's your responsibility."

Guilt for guilt's sake is sterile. I am willing to acknowledge the fact that my ancestors owned slaves and that I am complicit in a system which keeps people of color at a disadvantage today. But that acknowledgment doesn't help anybody in the here and now. As Unitarian Universalists, our guide should be love, not guilt. I agree with Thandeka that guilt-based anti-racism programs generally do not work to actively dismantle racism.

Yet I am not sure what does work. What President Obama saw working, in his eulogy in Charleston last June, was grace. And while I reject the theology of original depravity, I have to admit that our history has cast long shadows over us, and that these shadows are sometimes relieved by what might legitimately be called moments of grace. Moments when people take seriously Jesus' admonition to turn the other cheek, not to answer evil with evil. Moments when hate is met with love or forgiveness.

Some of those moments of grace are recounted in the song I sang earlier: the parents of children murdered who hold no hatred for the murderers, Rodney King, the victim of an appalling police beating, appealing for calm in the midst of riots. President Obama alluded to others in his Charleston eulogy:

He didn't know he was being used by God. Blinded by hatred, the alleged killer could not see the grace surrounding Reverend Pinckney and that Bible study group -- the light of love that shone as they opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join in their prayer circle. The alleged killer could have never anticipated the way the families of the fallen would respond when they saw him in court -- in the midst of unspeakable grief, with words of forgiveness. He couldn't imagine that."

We have seen this type of grace operating in our own denomination; when a man opened fire in our church in Knoxville, TN and killed two members, our denomination took out an ad in

the New York Times proclaiming that we refused to surrender to hatred, and that was the birth of the Standing On The Side of Love movement, known ever after for its yellow t-shirts.

Knowledge of good and evil is a necessary but not sufficient condition of being fully human. We should be grateful that Adam and Eve ate the fruit, even if it caused them to be expelled from the Garden. We are grateful that Thomas Jefferson wrote that all men are created equal, even though Jefferson was a slaveholder who fathered children from his female slave, even though the nation has never lived up to this ideal, for if the ideal had never been articulated, we would not know today how far short of the mark we are.

We must acknowledge that we have fallen short of the mark, but not give up to resignation that we are inherently wicked people. There are impulses of spite and impulses of grace in each of our hearts. We need more knowledge, not less. We need to walk a mile in another one's shoes.

Now grace may descend from God, for those of us who believe in God, or grace may simply be a response to what President Lincoln called the better angels of our nature for those who do not. My Unitarian Universalist heritage leads me to believe that we can grow grace and that understanding of the ways racism works in our culture, our nation and in our own hearts can help us to come into a closer realization of the promise on which our country was founded. Amen.

Readings for Original Sin

Lincoln, Second Inaugural

"If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

Genesis 3

8 They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate."