

The Church in the Context of Empire and Colonialism: Conforming to the World

The immigrants (“invaders”) from Europe brought with them, to the shores of Turtle Island (North American Continent), concepts of racial, cultural and spiritual superiority (Spring, 1). Scandinavians had their own experiences with the Sami indigenous peoples, and Europeans tended to think of all indigenous peoples as the “other” or as significantly different from themselves in basic human qualities.

From colonial times to today, most Protestants have declared that all human beings are entitled to equality of opportunity (“all men are created equal”), while engaging in acts of religious intolerance, racial segregation, cultural genocide, and discrimination against people of color. (2) To understand this characteristic of Protestantism, one must look at the ways the church developed.

The European experience of Christianity was formed in the context of the Roman Empire. In the worldview of the Roman Empire:

- The world is divided between civilized and uncivilized.
- The *Imperium* is the political expression of an ordered life.
- The civilized live their lives according to the laws of the *Imperium*.
- The ultimate goal of the *Imperium*/center is to bring all peoples under the control of the *Imperium* giving them order, culture, and civilization.
- Those people living outside of the *Imperium* are without law, culture and morals.
- The *Imperium* invades, conquers, and subjugates others, bringing them under its authority for their own good—so that these “others” may be civilized.
- Those considered pious and virtuous are compliant and loyal to the *Imperium*.
- To abide by the social-cultural norms giving order to society and to exhibit the habits and character traits important to the success of society is to be “civil.”
- The customs (*mores* – norms/laws) of the *City State* or *Imperium* are the model for the culture and the morals defining what is an ordered life and what is civilized. (3-4)

The advent of Christianity expanded these Roman concepts into a vision of converting “pagans.” The effort to conquer and occupy the Western Hemisphere was a joint venture of the Church and State. (4) As Edward Said describes, “There was a commitment which allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples should be subjugated and...these decent people could think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to displace or rule subordinate, inferior or less advanced people.” (4)

Why History?

There are two incongruous and conflicting sides to the long story of the church’s involvement with racism in the United States. One side is painful, tragic and villainous. The other side is amazing, wonderful, even heroic: standing against slavery, participating in the Civil Rights Movement. We need to begin with the painful side, because too often we try to avoid, deny or forget that the Christian church not only provided sanction and support for racism in U.S. society but tragically allowed, and continues to allow, racism to thrive in its own institutional life. (Barndt, 38)

The stories of the church’s involvement in racism will be very difficult for many to read and discuss. Our instincts are to protect the church by countering these stories with positive ones. But before we can become effective Christian resisters of racism in the 21st century, we need to recognize and keep in our consciousness the blasphemous ways in which our churches and our nation have misused God’s name to support racism from the time our country first began to take shape. (Barndt, 38)

The Church's Role in the Creation of a Racialized Society

From the time Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492, with a sword in one hand and a cross in the other, the church has brought God's blessing upon the colonial enterprise. The representatives of the church aboard Columbus' fleet gave God's approval to Spain's taking of the land and the subsequent genocide of the Taino indigenous peoples. (Barndt, 38-39)

Europeans' beliefs in their cultural and racial superiority over Native Americans and later enslaved Africans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and Asians were not born on American soil. They were part of the cultural baggage European settlers brought to Turtle Island. Europeans' belief in their own religious and cultural superiority was reinforced by the justifications being given for taking over Native American lands. North America acted as a hothouse for the growth of white racism and cultural chauvinism. (Spring, 5) Joel Spring quotes numerous famous white Americans, from Benjamin Franklin to religious leadership to Army generals, who absolutely assumed the superiority and rightful dominance of European Americans. (6)

The thinking of ordinary Europeans and European Americans about Native and African Americans became increasingly racialized over the course of the 17th century, but most of the development and propagation of that racism frame came from the leaders in the new U.S. society. White leaders such as judges, ministers, academicians and government officials have been the most important figures in developing, codifying and propagating strong social categorizations such as that described by the term "race." (Feagin, 49-50) Like many leaders today, these social leaders repeatedly and publicly cited reliance on God and divine providence to justify their actions. This was *especially* the case in their defense of a number of racist actions (Barndt, 43).

Since at least the mid-1600s a powerful racial framing has been explicitly shaped by this elite, an elite that has consistently communicated this framing by means of schools, churches, the legal system and mass media. Feagin defines the racial frame as the overarching worldview encompassing important racial ideas and beliefs, terms, images, emotions, inclinations, and interpretations and determining a way of being, perspective on life, and language and explanations that help structure, normalize, and make sense out of society. White racial framing is as much, if not more, subconscious than conscious. (Feagin 3, 10-11)

The contemporary *white racial frame* not only encompasses cognitive stereotypes and articulated values (the important conceptions of what is desirable or undesirable on racial matters), but also important nonlinguistic elements such as racialized emotions, images, even smells. Altogether, these various elements of a racial frame act as an "organizing principle;" that is, the ideas, images, feelings, dispositions, assumptions, perspectives, and worldview *about race* are used to interpret social reality (used to make sense of relational roles and responsibilities, to understand who is owed deference, who is deserving, who ought to control or lead, and so forth). (Feagin 11)

As anti-Indian genocide and African American enslavement became ever more important to economic development, European and European American elites honed a well-developed white racial frame designed to defend colonialism and imperialism. (Feagin, 50)

The famous Swedish physician and taxonomer Carl Linneaus played a pivotal role in the development of scientific racism in the 18th Century. Linneaus classified homo sapiens into five "biological races." According to Linneaus, each race possessed innate physiognomic characteristics: the *Americanus* (Native Americans) were red-skinned, of stubborn character, and angered easily; the *Africanus* (Africans) were black-skinned, relaxed, and of negligent character; the *Asiaticus* race (Asians) were yellow-skinned, avaricious, and easily distracted; whereas, unlike the character-imbalanced

understanding the violence of U.S. society and the often-tragic history of the church's role in race relations (Spring, 9).

All major white denominations had highly developed theology in support of the enslavement of Africans and African Americans. The Bible and the Christian faith provided the religious ideological basis for the subordination and enslavement of millions of people. Slavery was prominent in all thirteen colonies with major religious leaders, such as Cotton Mather, owning slaves. Tice's research finds that almost half of the published defenses of slavery were written by ministers, more than half of whom also enslaved African American people.

"They (these ministers) found slavery to be a natural condition of society. They found in the Bible ample evidence of God's favor on the institution of slavery, as well as proof for a widely held Hamitic curse on the Negro race. They battered down all notions that men are created equal and are thereby entitled to equal rights. They wrote that the Negro 'race' was so inherently degraded, its members were incapable of enjoying the fruits of liberty." (Barndt, 45)

We observe, notes sociologist Joe R Feagin (2013), that the racial framing of African Americans was religiously sanctioned and circulated broadly to rank-and-file citizens by leading officials in this relatively new country. Very important in this regard were prominent New England ministers like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, who were among the earliest North American intellectuals to aggressively defend the racist hierarchy. Like other colonists, they viewed African Americans and Indians as inferior. In a 1706 treatise, Cotton Mather argued that whites should try to "Christianize Negroes" to save their souls as well as those of their slavemasters. Christianizing Negroes, whom he describes as "creatures" and "barbarians," will make them willing to work harder for slavemasters and keep them from "magical conversations" with the devil. Mather commented thus:

"What shall I do that this poor creature may have cause to bless God forever, for falling into my hands. The state of your Negroes in this world, must be low, and mean and abject; a state of servitude. No great things in this world, can be done for them. Something then, let there be done, towards their welfare in the world to come." (Footnote: 39, pg. 234, Feagin 2013)

He added that those enslaved should be treated as "thy neighbours". This influential leader accepted slavery as God-ordained and necessary for African Americans because they were lowly, "brutish", and "stupid" creatures. He viewed a Christianizing education as enabling Negroes to become "men" and not be "beasts.". At an early stage, this powerful rationalizing frame was insisted upon by colonial economic, legal, political, and religious elites-men who actively fostered the increasingly omnipresent racial framing by means of communications in white-controlled churches, schools, and newspapers. (Feagin 2013: 54)

Up to a few decades before emancipation, no denominations other than Quakers and Mennonites, took unequivocal stands against slavery. At the last moment, however, in what can be compared to deathbed conversions, one Northern church after another jumped to the other side, identifying themselves as abolitionists in opposition to slavery. These crossings over to the anti-slavery side were very important, of course, and cause for great celebration. But it is unfortunate that most church historians recall only where things ended up and not the hundreds of years of prior support of slavery (Barndt, 45).

Once Protestant churches in the North became involved in the abolition of slavery, these churches continued to assert that African Americans were inferior people. The churches continued to promulgate the God-inspired belief in the superiority and supremacy of European Americans and the inferiority of Native Americans, African Americans and other people of color. (Barndt, 46). Northern



Christians instituted the practices of segregation and the laws of social disempowerment that, when later reproduced in the South, were called Jim Crow laws and which have been the underlying structure of apartheid in our country ever since the Civil War. The weighty influence of the white church on society in both the North and the South provided sanction and support for racism. (Barndt, 42)

Well up to the time of the civil rights movement, white denominations willingly conformed to and obeyed the laws of apartheid segregation in the U.S. Nearly all Northern and Southern churches pronounced God's blessing upon the practices of segregation and followed similar rules themselves. Many people alive today still remember the practices of segregation in Northern communities that excluded people of color from membership in many Christian congregations, assigned separate seating in the sanctuary to African Americans, and insisted that people of color receive communion only after the white people had received it (Barndt, 47).

As a result of these historical forces dominated groups in the U.S., in their relations with the Protestant church, have primarily experienced cultural genocide, deculturalization, and the denial of opportunity, respect and inclusion. (Spring, 8)

The Church's Role in the Continuing Colonization of Indigenous Peoples

We now shall focus primarily on the ways white Christian ideologies have played out in interactions with the indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. This focus is particularly appropriate this year as Minnesotans marks the Sesquicentennial of the U.S.-Dakota War and the ethnic cleansing of the area in which we in the Saint Paul Area Synod live, work and worship.

Focusing on Christianity's relationship with the indigenous peoples allows us to examine the Settler Mentality that has shaped racial relations in particular ways in Minnesota. Minnesota now "leads" the nation in the severity of racial disparities in almost all measures – mortgage lending rates, employment practices, health disparities, graduation disparities, racial profiling, incarceration disparities, etc . Why is that? And how are our churches helping us analyze and address the racial climate of Minnesota?

A very hardened sense of whiteness developed in Minnesota through the particular history here. This idea of whiteness arose out of settler consciousness and worldview. In some ways "the virtuous, the true" Minnesotan still has these settler virtues. When identity becomes hardened in this way, a strong self-consciousness of "We/They" develops. In Minnesota, the "We" is the white person -- in particular those whites who have this settler consciousness and who share something of this history. Here the "They" was initially created in the context of settler interactions with the indigenous peoples. The "They" category was then expanded, in white cultural transmissions, to all peoples who were not identified with the white settler experience.

The various Protestant denominations participated fully in the taking of the land of North America and in the massacres of indigenous peoples by providing the spiritual strength and courage for European-American settlers, as well as theological understanding that genocide of Native American peoples was an acceptable action. Although a few individual congregations challenged these positions, the church with near unanimity supported racial domination, land acquisition, and Native American extinction. (Barndt, 39)

For European Protestants, the "civilizing" of Native Americans has focused on:

- religious conversion,
- the elimination of Native languages and separation from indigenous culture,

- the instilling of a particular type of “work ethic,”
- the creation of a desire or a necessity to accumulate private property (while extinguishing the cultural ethic of sharing and the ethic of common good),
- severance of Native people’s relationship with Mother Earth, to be replaced by a treatment of Mother Earth as a commodity,
- the repression of pleasure,
- the replacement of extended family and clan structures with a nuclear family structure,
- the reduction of the power of women,
- the social disrespect of Two Spirited (LGBT) people, and
- the implementation of authoritarian child-rearing practices. (Spring, 14)

Contrary to the expectations of early European settlers, Native Americans demonstrated little interest in converting to Christianity or being “taught” the values they observed among the European settlers. For example, as Margaret Szasz writes, “the powerful Powhatan Algonquian saw their culture as superior to the colonial culture. As a result, Virginians encountered overwhelming difficulty in attempting to convert Algonquians to Christianity.” (14) When John Eliot preached to a gathering of Indians in 1646, he reported “They gave no heed unto it, but were weary and rather despised what I said.” (14)

After the American Revolution, the efforts by European colonists to “civilize” Native Americans were replaced by a major effort of the U.S. government to use deculturalization policies as a means of gaining Indian land and of forcing conversion to Christianity. (15)

When the assumed superiority and completeness of European American culture is at the core of a social or religious tradition, white institutions do not incorporate new understandings from other societal groups in ways that could change or transform the colonizer society for the better. Thus Native Americans’ theological wisdom, their histories, their knowledge and technologies, and their further social, economic and cultural aspirations were never included in the unfolding of U.S.-Indigenous relationships. (22) Instead we see Congress passing the Civilization Fund Act of 1819, establishing school systems for Native children to be operated by white religious missionaries. Initially it was thought that the missionary teachers would culturally transform Native Americans into “civilized” persons in a single generation. (23) Protestantism and European education went hand-in-hand in the context of school education because of the wide-spread understanding that the “civilizing of pagans” necessarily included abandonment of Native religions and conversion to Christianity. (25)

Following the horrific forced march of the Choctaw and Cherokee peoples in 1838 as the U.S. Army removed them from their homelands in the East to “permanent” Indian territory (which is now the state of Oklahoma), one of the people’s first steps was to establish their own school systems. Using bilingual teachers and Cherokee texts, the Cherokees controlled a school system that produced a tribe almost 100% literate, both adults and youth. (31) The response of the U.S. government, as voiced by President Andrew Jackson, was to “worry that education was resulting in Indians gaining the tools to resist the policies of the US. Government.” (28) But as Spring notes, “Gaining the ability to resist was precisely why the Cherokees had decided literacy was important.” (28)

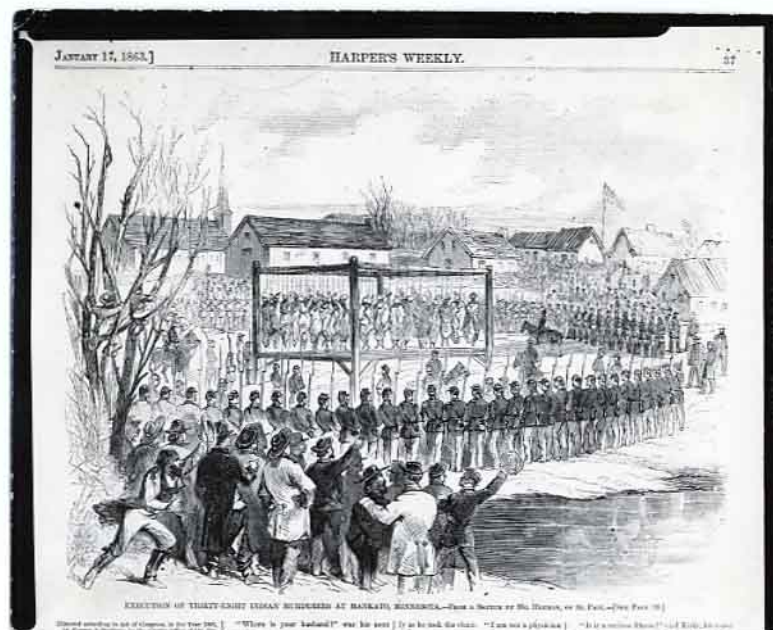
In contrast, the Civilization Fund schools, run by Christian clergy and laity, supported by significant monetary campaigns in the churches, had proven remarkably unsuccessful. Many white missionary teachers defined as their goal “the total rejection of the tribal past and the total transformation of each individual Indian, a cultural destruction and regeneration to be brought about by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.” (26)

What meaning do we derive from the fact that 150 years ago the largest mass execution in U.S. history was scheduled as a Christmas observance in Mankato, Minnesota? Carpenters were brought from out-

of-state. They rushed to complete engineering and building a single-gallows that would execute 38 Dakota men in a single stroke on December 26, 1862. The date was of much significance. What did the preachers preach as it approached? When the date arrived, a large assemblage of settlers and their clergy, drawn from settler communities throughout the region, cheered and rejoiced together. Observers were able to purchase a number of different souvenir postcards of the execution to send to their friends.

As Barndt says of the nation as a whole, the “genocidal path became acceptable to almost everyone in the white community, including the churches.” (Barndt, 40)

After the Civil War as white settlers moved into western lands, residential boarding schools were established, again mostly staffed by Christian clergy and laity. Children as young as 4 or 5 years old were forcibly removed from their homes, often by clergy themselves, and transported to residential schools too far away for their families to visit. The children were held in these schools for many years, sometimes without being able to ever visit their families. Many children were abused in the boarding schools, and many died there



and were buried in mass graves. After reviewing the nature of the residential boarding schools, Spring concludes that “this plan of Indian education is one of the great endeavors to destroy cultures and languages and replace them with another culture and language. The key was the removal of children from the influences of family and tribe and their placement in institutions where they would not be allowed to speak their native languages or practice native cultural customs.” (Spring, 36)

Many indigenous people living in Minnesota today have members of their parents’ generation and certainly of their grandparents’ generation who were forced to spend their growing-up years in Christian boarding schools. Thousands upon thousands of indigenous people living today attended Indian boarding schools themselves; they were not forced to attend by physical violence but because the U.S. provided them with no other educational opportunities. And the destruction of Indian families and culture has continued through “adoption out” of Native children in massive numbers (often into “good white Christian families”), police profiling, uninformed sterilization of young indigenous women, State toleration of violence against Native women, untruthful school curriculum, and cultural assaults of many kinds.

No matter how well-meaning they were, the churches' missionary efforts were instrumental in defeating, pacifying and controlling Indians, making more obedient slaves, and justifying white domination of social institutions. With few exceptions, Christian missionary activities toward Native Americans and enslaved Africans have served the purposes of the enslaver and the conquerors. (Barndt, 41)

Today wide-spread social practices in the U.S. wreck destruction and despair in communities of color, while producing advantages and privileges for white communities. These social practices are not loudly or widely protested in the white community, including its churches, and therefore carry a general stamp of acceptance. People are not at all embarrassed, and their churches are not embarrassed, to accept the status of white superiority and its accompanying rewards. (Barndt, 49)

The "So What" Questions

What does it take for the formation and support of racism by the church? What issues are important to consider in this analysis?

- Cultural and ideological factors, such as
 - a worldview that portrays white income and assets as a blessing from God – understanding whites to be “richly blessed” in material ways without a critique of the systems of oppression that creates such “blessings”
 - valuing of abstract, rational thinking and its “scientific” myths, over human and relational consequences. (At some level, is a felt-belief that whites are more intelligent than people of color still part of our psyches?)
 - religious history of separation from those understood to be “others”
 - ideals of creating a State embodying European Christian rule as the will of the people,
 - an aesthetic of “purity and goodness” that reflects the imagined purity and worthiness of the elite of society (What music is considered most appropriate in church? How are religious images portrayed in “classical” style in our art and stained-glass windows? Etc.)
 - the church serving as Magisterium – making decisions, and expressing disinterest, based on property involved
 - in the context of great and growing racial injustice, theology that values personal piety most highly, does not read the Newer Testament in the context of the Roman Empire, and does not identify or address the racism within and about itself
 - others:
- Socio-economic factors within the Church, representing the ways power is distributed and used, such as
 - how rights and privileges are dispersed within the church,
 - feeling bound from speaking out on certain political issues because of the State's taxing mechanisms
 - the ways the property interests of the church cause it to align its thinking and politics with the State
 - others:

Does it serve the property interests of the church to be antiracist? If not, what then is our response? It is important to understand what factors within the church allow for the continuance of racism. We need to acknowledge the ways that these tend to bind us today.

These notes are a redaction—words have been added or deleted or reordered to give coherence and to simplify the presentation of the material.



Compiled by Margery Otto and Okogyeamon, ASDIC Metamorphosis, from:

Barndt, Joseph. *Becoming an Anti-Racist Church: Journeying toward Wholeness* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011).

Feagin, Joe R. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York: Routledge,

2013).

Spring, Joel. *Deculturalization and the Struggle for Equality: A Brief History of the Education of Dominated Cultures*

in the United States, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010). All references are to Joel Spring, unless otherwise noted.