

# Race in a Post-Obama America



## *The Church Responds*

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## FOREWORD



*“How do I live free in this black body?”*

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, from *Between the World and Me*

Many pundits hailed the election of Barack Obama as president as the end of all things constructed and construed by race. Over and over I heard men and women who live in gated and cul-de-sac communities trumpet a tale I failed to see. *Postracial* was the term that carried on the airwaves and in the Twitterverse: America had finally realized its noble creed of equality under the law and under God.

Yet as I listened I shook my head, wondering, What universe do they occupy? I listened to these words from the Southside of Chicago, where hope and tragedy dance daily for all children who are kissed by nature’s sun. The promise of America has not cast its shadow or gazed upon the children who still hold the scars of forced exile and importation to this nation. I do not deny the triumphs, the moments of celebration and progress in our imperfect yet sturdy democracy. But this socially constructed ideology

called race remains the original sin of our nation. Our institutions carry the residue and scent of race.

America doesn't see this.

To Ta-Nehisi Coates, impassioned chronicler of the open secret that America struggles to acknowledge, racialized thought and imagined supremacy are the myth and doctrine undergirding our democracy.

As he argues in his book *Between the World and Me*, the nation takes race as a defined and unchangeable reality, like a "feature of the natural world," and therefore feels absolved from doing much about it. He writes,

Racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition. In this way, racism is rendered as the innocent daughter of Mother Nature, and one is left to deplore the Middle Passage or the Trail of Tears the way one deplores an earthquake, a tornado, or any other phenomenon that can be cast as beyond the handiwork of men.<sup>1</sup>

In this climate, our common explanations for the persistent disparities that are found in education, criminal justice, housing, and wealth fall into two camps. One argument looks at racial disparities through the lens of poverty, economic policy, and wealth creation and comes to the conclusion that these factors doom the poor, especially poor people of color. The other argument is made through the lens of cultural deficiency, claiming that people of color need to be injected with the wider Protestant work ethic and values of responsibility to close the sociological and material gap.

Sadly, both camps fail to confront the unspoken American belief that Coates names in his writing: being black and human is considered an oxymoron in much of society.

Blackness is viewed as a deficiency to be expelled from one's psyche or reformed in order to be palatable to the majority culture. More than a century ago, W. E. B. Du Bois spoke of this duality of the African soul that must try to heal in the face of a forced sociological schizophrenia, that "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>2</sup>

Racism is not expunged by the elimination of blackness. Racism is not exorcised from the American lexicon through a doctrine of moral deficiency. It is eradicated by Christians only when we reject these myths and come to grips with the beauty of Africanness and dare to live out a new Christianity that is not beholden to European views. We fight these myths by admitting they exist. We fight them by facing the biblical mandate about what the Lord requires: to act justly and to love mercy and to walk with deep humility before God.

As you read through the pages of this book, my prayer is that each chapter will challenge, disturb, and ultimately inspire. America is in need of antiracism activists, preachers, and thinkers who are not people of color. America desires voices with a moral center that dare speak truth to power and walk humbly with our God. These yet-to-be United States wait patiently for your voice, song, poem, essay, sermon, and action to join the cadre of women and men who seek to dismantle and repent from this original sin called racism.

The Rev. Otis Moss III

## PREFACE

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Cries of “Don’t shoot!” and “I can’t breathe!” reminded our nation that despite the jubilation over the election of the first black president, racism is living and breathing in the United States. Once again the country has been reminded of its original sin of racism.

A person of color was finally in the White House, which was rightly celebrated. However, President Barack Obama was not elected on an antiracism platform. In fact, while some great things have happened during his presidency in terms of racial justice, his administration deported more undocumented immigrants than any president in history.

This book began to be constructed in Chicago during a conversation with a diverse group of faculty and staff from McCormick Theological Seminary and local pastors in the fall of 2008, before the election of President Obama. The group identified a number of topics dealing with racism that churches might discuss. Those initial studies were published online at *The Thoughtful Christian* and were very

popular. We have taken some of those studies, updated them, and added four new chapters taking into account the rapidly changing landscape of race relations in the United States. Despite the large and diverse group of impressive authors of this book, you will find a common approach and direction. We suggest that you read the entire book; however, feel free to jump to any chapter you like. The book may be read alone, but we hope you will read it with a group of people who want to discuss racial justice and to take action.

Many Christians taking part in the current discussion and protests across the United States do not want to sweep the original sin of racism back under the white carpet of complacency once the protests die down. We hope that this book will provoke lively discussion and urge a long-term commitment to confess and repair in order to one day be reconciled to one another.



# INTRODUCTION



On August 9, 2014, my ministry came full circle in the death of Michael Brown.

I was raised in Mississippi, a young girl during the first civil rights movement. When Dr. King walked from Memphis to Jackson down highway 51 to complete the march started by James Meredith, he walked through our place, alongside our cotton fields. When our schools were desegregated, I saw children beaten —and I didn't nearly see the worst of it. Southern pastors who preached too much about "the situation" were asked to leave. Sympathetic, protesting Northerners who were asked to leave got in their cars and left. Southerners first had to go by the house and collect their family and belongings.

One Southerner who was asked to leave his pulpit in Starkville, Mississippi, was Bob Walkup. Years later, as a young minister, I sat in his living room in Auburn, Alabama, and heard him tell his riveting story. When he came to the end, I responded, "Oh, Bob, I don't know what I would do

if I were ever asked to leave a church.” He looked at me with kind eyes and said in his gravely voice, “Mary Gene, there are a lot of churches, but you only have one soul. Don’t lose it.” His words have been a constant source of encouragement to me in my ministry—and I have repeated them hundreds of times.

In some ways, my involvement in the situation around Michael Brown’s death was a working out of the demons that plagued me from those earlier experiences. In fact, I have come to believe that God placed me in St. Louis at this particular moment in history, gave me time to develop deep relationships that allowed me to preach God’s unrelenting word when the events unfolded in Ferguson. And let’s be clear: Ferguson is just a code word for the systemic racism embedded in our institutions and the white privilege that is so ubiquitous that the privileged hardly notice it.

Michael Brown was a young high school graduate who was heading to college. He was raised by his mom, who did everything right. She worked at a well-known St. Louis grocery store chain, along with one of our church’s bright graduate students. Michael had a father and a stepfather who loved him. He was no saint, but if the right to live was reserved for saints alone, every pew in America would be empty. As a pastor, I am privy to the white children who struggle with drugs, shoplift in the local stores—and have all their youthful indiscretions buried by sharp lawyers. Michael was not unlike many of the children the church has confirmed and patiently loved into adulthood—only he didn’t have the protection that comes with whiteness.

Michael was a black man in a world that does not value black lives. There was nothing unique about the death of an unarmed black teenager at the hands of an overzealous police officer. It happens all the time. What made his situation untenable for the community was the fact that he

lay on the ground for over three hours. His mother could not hold him. There was no real attempt to save his life. He lay on the street in front of the community—including children to whom he was like a big brother—and he died.

The reaction of the community was immediate. White clergy sensed that we had to take our cue from the black community. “What do you want us to do?” we asked. One of the problems is that clergy had not previously built relationships that would allow us to respond quickly in such a volatile environment. That left us in the difficult position of building those relationships while responding to this tragedy. It was messy, and the news media took every advantage of that messiness.

The traditional leaders in the black community just assumed that they, by default, would direct the response. But quickly it became clear that there was, forming from the grass roots, a group of young leaders who didn’t require approval or wait for the direction of their elders or the church. In fact, they viewed the complacency of the older leaders, preachers, and politicians as a mitigating factor in the death of so many young black men. For too long, they felt the church had suggested that the victims were responsible for their own victimization—pull up your pants, change your diction, and engage in the politics of respectability. What is being called the second civil rights movement is solely the responsibility of these young, brilliant leaders whose desire for freedom absolutely trumps their fear.

The first four months were extremely challenging. Every night there were meetings. Every night there were protests. A small group of clergy from various traditions was trying to follow the live streaming and be present when needed. Generally there was a call for support every night. It was exhausting. We had scores of people coming from out of town for the big events, and they all needed

hospitality. Many organizations were trying to provide leadership, and no one was clear about the lane in which they needed to travel. There were those looking to serve, and there were those looking for fifteen minutes of fame. Again, it was messy. Out of that came some remarkable coalitions that continue to meet weekly; one involves sixty or more organizations working together to change the system.

We slept little. On the streets until midnight, we were up and in the office or hospital in the morning. One night while protesting in Ferguson, the group was called to Shaw, another area where another young black teenager had been killed. When we arrived, the police tape was still up and the investigators were doing their work. Someone pulled me aside to meet the boy's mother. She could only cry and say, "What did I do wrong?" I went to the morgue at 2 a.m. with his father. They would only let him see his son's face, and he left wondering, "Why won't they let me see his body? How are they planning to manipulate the evidence?" I have seen too much not to be skeptical. I have come to understand that trust in the system is another benefit of our whiteness.

I was fortunate to serve a congregation that understood my place to be both in the pulpit and in the street—or, at least, a large majority did.<sup>1</sup> At times it was a balancing act. I had one elder resign from session and the church on Facebook. We exchanged some emails, and by the next morning he wrote, "I would like to stay, if you will have me." I welcomed him with open arms, of course.

The turning point in the movement was the night of the nonindictment. We had known for months that Officer Darren Wilson would not be held accountable. For four months, churches and community groups had been planning for the day. We attempted to work with government and law enforcement officials to develop a plan that would

allow people to express their pain, allow the protestors to exercise their First Amendments rights, keep the community safe—and, most of all, value people above property. I have nothing but the harshest criticism for Robert P. McCulloch, the prosecutor, who had no desire to work with the community and, instead, developed a plan that would ensure the worst possible outcome.

On the evening of November 24, 2014, after the non-indictment, our church gathered at 6 p.m. for worship. Following the service, my daughter and I traveled to Ferguson. Even though the crowd knew what was coming, we were holding on to a small ray of hope that justice would be served. When the decision was announced at 9 p.m., it was as if the very life had been sucked from people. There was wailing and crying and the breaking of glass. But then the familiar drumming started and the chanting began—and it was peaceful and cohesive. Suddenly, in the distance, we saw tear gas floating through the air, heading in our direction. We heard gunshots. My daughter and I held hands and tried to run away from the tear gas; we were not entirely successful. As we ran, we stopped to care for some of the people who were the most severely affected. With the help of a stranger, who turned out to be a clergywoman I had not previously met, we headed for our car but were trapped by a police car that was in flames. It had suspiciously been left unattended on the street.

After that night the protests continued, but many of us began moving away from the nightly gatherings and concentrating our work on faith-based organizing. The continuing protests are important, and I have nothing but admiration for those who see that as their role. A wonderful group of interfaith clergywomen began to study together and work for change. We had a number of women's marches. We called ourselves the Wailing Women,

after Rachel: “weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more” (Matt. 2:18). At one of these marches, I stood near a woman with a picture of her son at various stages in his life, from childhood to graduation. His name was Jeremy. I turned to her and said, “Tell me about Jeremy.” And the tears began to pour down her face as she spoke, in great pain, of her beloved son. It was heartbreaking. The community has been filled with opportunities for sacred conversation. And change is coming. . . . one *resignation* (the word the establishment uses for “firing”) of an official firing another. We simply cannot let the movement stall this time.

For eight months, protestors chanted, “The whole damn system is guilty as hell,” in a community in which most of the citizens thought the protestors were wrong. But the Department of Justice report is vindication, if not satisfaction. It clearly points out that crimes were committed, blacks were targeted, lies were told, and that the system is broken beyond a simple mending. What it does not do is hold anyone accountable. And that creates further pain and distrust.

Finally, Ferguson is every community. It is not the worst—not by a long shot. In fact, one could stand in Ferguson and spit in any direction and hit a municipality that is every bit as corrupt and racist. Every state, every city, every community. When we think that our community is different, we “deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8) There is not a person in the United States who does not live in Ferguson. Our response as people of faith is to decide what our baptism calls us to do about it.

This book is for Christians—especially white Christians living in the United States—to read, discuss with others, and initiate or continue a plan of action to confront racism. Some chapters are informative and offer

reflection. Others suggest an array of actions you and your faith community might take. I urge you to take the time to read this book, to pray, to consider what plans of action you might take, to discuss with others, and then to start or continue confronting racism in your church, community, and nation.

The Rev. Mary Gene Boteler

## PART I



### RACISM DEFINED AND RECOUNTED



# CHAPTER 1



## DEFINING TERMS

Much has been accomplished through civil rights legislation that has paved the way legally for racial equality. Nevertheless, racist attitudes and practices still exist. On the one hand, the election of the first African American president and the first Latina appointment to the Supreme Court offer hope for continued progress toward the elimination of racism. On the other hand, the Supreme Court's actions invalidating key parts of the Voting Rights Act, the continued instances of police killings of innocent people of color, and the burning of black churches and Muslim places of worship remind us that racism is still very alive and flourishing in the United States.

This chapter attempts to help define racism and some of the pertinent concepts involved in discussing it. The hope is that by the end of the chapter readers will have a deeper understanding about racism and the roles people can play to ensure its demise. Many of the terms and concepts introduced here are discussed more deeply throughout the book.

## Defining Key Terms

Four terms that are often confused in discussions of racism are *culture*, *ethnicity*, *race*, and *nationality*. It is helpful to distinguish them.

*Culture* includes nonbiological characteristics of a group based on shared behaviors, thoughts, and values that are learned. Cultures often have symbols that identify them. Examples of shared culture might include hippie culture, Western culture, Middle Eastern culture, Latin culture, LGBT culture, Dallas Cowboy football culture, or racist culture.

*Ethnicity* also refers to social traits, not physical traits, that are shared by a human group. These traits might include a shared history, language, religion, culture, traditions, nationality, or tribe. People identify with one another as coming from common ancestors and sharing distinctive cultural traits. As opposed to race, people identify their own ethnic connection rather than it being defined and imposed by others. Some examples of ethnic groups include Native American tribes and Jews. Unfortunately, due to racism in the United States, many national, tribal, and linguistic ethnic groups have been lumped together into one single ethnic category, such as Negro, Indian, Latino, or white, which has created confusion between ethnicity and race.

*Race* refers to real or imagined physical traits that distinguish one group of people from another. It was first introduced in the United States as a biological concept to categorize humans based on skin color, hair texture, and eye color in order to privilege one group and to control other groups. (More on whiteness will be discussed in chapter 10.)

*Nationality* refers simply to one's country of citizenship. It is not an indicator of a person's race. A common mistake

### *Three Myths about Racism*

**"I'm colorblind. Everyone is the same to me."**

To be "colorblind" in a racialized society denies what people of color experience. To be "colorblind" is to deny the cultural values, norms, histories, and life experiences of diverse racial groups.

**"You only need to work hard to achieve the American dream" (bootstrap mentality).**

This belief does not consider the impact of racial inequality or the generational advantages some groups have, nor does it take into account circumstances pertinent to racial group membership and access to the benefits and opportunities within society.

**"I'm not racist. Some of my best friends are black, Latino, Asian, etc."**

Associations with individuals of other racial groups through friendship, marriage, and mission and/or volunteer work do not eliminate racist conditioning. Overcoming racism is an ongoing process.

is to ask people their nationality when what is sought is their ethnicity.

Due to this country's history of categorizing people according to skin color so that light-skinned people could have privilege, much confusion exists between how to define oneself on government forms and other documents that request information about one's identity. The racial categories most commonly used today on most applications are white, African American or black, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and some other race or origin.

These categories and the high proportion of those who check "other," such as Arabs, demonstrate the development of racial identification over time, which will continue

to change. Throughout the nation's history, those called white have been dominant and normative.

In 1790, as the United States began to shape its identity away from a colony and toward a nation, the first United States Congress began the process of legally codifying race with the passing of the 1790 Naturalization Act. This act limited U.S. citizenship to "free white persons of good and moral character." Not all people who were considered "white" today were seen as "white" in this period, either by legal definition or common understanding, but the passing of the 1790 act ensured that access to citizenship in the developing United States was limited to those whose ancestry was European.

## Difficulty of Defining Racism

Racism is multifaceted and has both racial and cultural considerations. The complexities of racism make it nearly impossible to define as a singular concept. Although racism is informed by perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors associated with one's own racial group and other racial groups, the key factors that make racism what it is are the elements of power and privilege.

Part of the difficulty is the tendency to interchangeably define racism as *prejudice* and *discrimination*. There are differences between each of these.

*Racial prejudice* involves judgments, opinions, attitudes, or feelings formed before the facts are known or in disregard of the facts that contradict them related to race. We all prejudge others. Most all persons have prejudice against some other group. As long as we do not act on this prejudice to harm the other group, it is simply prejudice. Example: The belief that all members of another racial group are lazy, lack positive moral values, and are stupid.

*Racial discrimination* is the act or practice of giving different treatment to persons according to their membership in a racial or ethnic group. Example: A member of one racial group treats poorly or denies service to members of another racial group in a restaurant.

Prejudice and discrimination are distinguishable and describe different realities based on race with varied consequences. Most often, and for the purposes of this book, when we speak of racism we are referring to the practice of racial discrimination in which those from the dominant race are harming people from other races. The following definitions are helpful in providing a foundational understanding of racism and how racism works:

Racism is a system of advantage or privilege based on race.

Racism is racial prejudice plus institutional power.

In the United States and some other countries around the world, the dominant racial group is white. In the context of racism, the system of advantage or privilege primarily benefits white people. Of course, privileges and advantages do not look the same for every individual white person, due to the multiplicity of identities each person carries.

Racism in its broadest sense has particular expressions in other countries around the world. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) has organized a series of conferences to address issues of racism around the world. Many countries have distinct experiences of discrimination in terms of race, often negatively impacting indigenous groups, certain ethnic groups, the caste system, or immigrant groups. Because racism is a social construct, each country experiences it differently. In this book, the focus is on racism in the United States.

## *Racism*

### **intentional and unintentional**

The personnel committee's policy is to interview members of various racial groups to meet the organization's diversity employment requirements. They continually select members of one racial group for the final candidate pool.

A teacher provides a reading list of contemporary authors to the class. The list features primarily white authors.

### **overt and covert**

Members of specific racial groups are steered by a real estate agent to look only at housing in particular neighborhoods. Other clients are offered broader options.

A congregation's outsourced operating functions are always provided by individuals or businesses owned by members of one racial group.

### **connected to privilege**

Some members of a college's student activities committee challenge the nomination for committee president of someone from a different racial group, stating, "We've never had a [blank] in that position, and now may not be the time."

A security guard routinely interrogates members of certain racial/ethnic groups while allowing others to simply pass by.

### **connected to power**

Members of particular racial/ethnic groups are stopped while driving when they have broken no laws.

A health facility's expansion plans result in the displacement of community residents who are mostly members of one racial and economic group.

## The Family of “isms”

Racism gets expressed in different ways, from patterns of access to schools, housing, employment, and health care; to language and assumptions about competency and ability; to hate crimes and violence. Racism should be “conceived as a family of *isms* based on race, or racisms.”<sup>1</sup> Following are definitions of several types of racism and examples of each.

*Individual/personal racism* is an individual’s belief in the superiority of her or his own racial group over other racial groups that is expressed through attitudes and behaviors that maintain those superior and inferior positions.

- A parent explains to a child that a classmate can’t be as smart as she is because people in that racial group just aren’t as smart as people in their own racial group.
- A worker expresses to a colleague that the new executive was hired only to meet a racial quota.
- A store manager instructs a salesperson to “keep an eye on” patrons who belong to particular racial groups.

*Institutional racism* includes laws, traditions, and practices that systematically result in inequalities based on racial preconceptions. It is the perpetuation of a double standard of treatment and opportunities evolving from a positive valuation of the dominant racial group (which in the United States is the group we refer to as “white”) and a negative valuation of nondominant racial group members. Institutional racism may also be referred to as *systemic racism* or *structural racism*.

- A bank refuses mortgage loans for the purchase of homes in neighborhoods where mostly Latino/a, African American, and new immigrant groups reside.

- Local media coverage of an inner-city neighborhood is only about criminal activity.
- A congregation displays in its bulletins and information boards only images and cultural perspectives that reflect the dominant racial group.

*Cultural racism* combines elements of individual and institutional racism that express superiority or domination of one race's cultural heritage over that of another race. It is natural to have pride in one's heritage and traditions, but cultural racism comes into play when the dominant racial group holds power to define cultural values and the individual forms those values take, rewarding those who possess them and punishing or ignoring those who do not.<sup>2</sup> In the United States the dominant culture is white, and white people as well as people of color participate in enforcing the primacy of white culture.

- An Asian American parent prefers that her child be exposed to European classical musical forms instead of traditional Korean music in the child's diverse school.
- An African American receptionist at a medical office is noticeably agitated when communicating with patients who do not speak English.
- A school or professional sports team continues to use a Native American image as its mascot after community members have requested that it not do so.

*Internalized racism* involves the destructive patterns of feelings and behaviors experienced by recipients of racism when they adopt racial stereotypes, racial prejudices, and misinformation about their own racial group.<sup>3</sup>

- An Asian girl chooses the white Barbie doll because "she's the prettiest."



- Despite being the brightest student in class, a Latino boy chooses to sit in the back of the class and always defers to his white classmates.
- An African American worker, talking with other African American workers, insists that white people are natural leaders because they are smarter.

*Environmental racism* is demonstrated in the placement of toxic and hazardous waste sites, landfills, and polluting industries in African American, Asian, Latino/a, Native American, migrant worker, and working poor communities.

- A community's housing values decrease when it is discovered that the homes have been built on a toxic landfill.
- Children are experiencing symptoms of asthma and lead poisoning. A chemical plant is located in their community.
- State and city officials do not apply environmental laws, regulations, and practices uniformly across all communities.

## Damages of Racism

Many who have been the targets of racism can readily express the harm of racism in their lives. What is often missed is the effect of racism on the individuals and members of groups who perpetuate it. Racism for many is defined on a personal level only. They view it as something that resides in attitudes and beliefs about one's own group's superiority and the complementary attitudes and beliefs that other groups are inferior. Some believe we simply need to concentrate on changing individual feelings, thoughts, and behaviors to eliminate racism:

To end racism, policies must change, racist behavior must stop, the injustices from racism must be redressed, and all people must recover from the damage done to them by racism. . . . To fully eliminate racism, we must heal three forms of damage[:] . . . damage done to individuals targeted by racism[,] . . . damage to members of targeted groups from “internalized” racism . . . [and] the corruption of the minds and spirits of those conditioned by society to act as the agents of racism.<sup>4</sup>

Individual transformation is indeed essential. However, we must not lose sight of how racism is built into the systems that individuals live and work in.

## Steps to Challenge Racism

While learning and exploring the many aspects and dimensions of racism, one might feel overwhelmed that there is so much to learn and understand. Living within a society where racism exists, we have all been affected in some way. This includes experiencing feelings of hurt, pain, anger, guilt, embarrassment, shame, or powerlessness. As Christians, we are called each day to realize God’s desire for us to be in community and, through Christ’s example, are encouraged to move ahead boldly. There are many concrete steps we can take. Here are just a few:

- Be open to talking about the history of your racial group and other racial groups.
- Check to see if your assumptions are based on racial stereotypes or racial prejudices.
- Be open to continuous learning to address the harm of racism.

- Recognize the privilege and power you may have based on racial group membership.
- Understand the impact your cultural values may have on others in your work and worship settings.
- Be aware of your racial prejudices and stereotypes about others.
- Appreciate the challenges and opportunities presented by perspectives from diverse racial and ethnic groups.
- Create opportunities at church, at work, and in your community to be racially diverse and inclusive.

As people of faith, we view racism as an affront to God. Racism contradicts the belief that each of us is created in the image of God, and at its basic level, racism infers that some are more valued than others in the human family.