White Mennonite Peacemakers: Oxymorons, Grace, and Nearly Thirty Years of Talking About Whiteness

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In the late 1990s, three of my colleagues and I conducted a Damascus Road Anti-Racism workshop for fifty Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) staff and volunteers, most on their way to international service sites. With a few exceptions, white Mennonites from the US dominated the group. Less than forty-eight hours later, a small remnant remained, a mere third of the group. The rest had left to protest what they had felt was a confrontational, rigid, and one-sided workshop.

Although this was not the first training meltdown we encountered, it was by far the most dramatic. That it had unfolded where many of us earned our livelihoods only added to the stress. As we debriefed, we pondered what had gone awry. Hundreds of other workshops, while intense, had gone well. Participants regularly lauded our ability to navigate racism's treacherous waters. Yet, as we lingered over coffee and wondered about our future employment, one realization became clear: the mood shifted, the intensity increased, and conflict erupted whenever a critical mass of white North American Mennonite peacemakers—those activists, pastors, educators, and theologians who claimed identities as peace and justice advocates—joined an anti-racism training.

Twenty years later, one question continues to trouble me: Why did we have such a difficult time working with white North American Mennonite peacemakers in anti-racism trainings? The musings that follow emerge from my social location as a white, heterosexual, male, from the nearly thirty years I've invested in dismantling racism in the church and academy, and from my research, teaching, and writing on whiteness. The two touchstones I will return to in this essay are, as my title suggests, oxymorons and grace.

First, a definition. The literature on white identity provides multiple definitions of whiteness, ranging from those of historians and sociologists like W.E.B. DuBois, who in 1920 proclaimed that "whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!," to those of literary luminaries like

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Tony Morrison, who define whiteness as a racial identity encumbered by "a dark and abiding presence that moves the hearts and texts of American literature with fear and longing."[1] I will employ the definition offered by poet and theologian James W. Perkinson, who contends that whiteness "is a cipher for a social position of domination underwritten by a text of absolution."[2] His approach highlights the dynamics of superiority and innocence, two themes especially relevant for this discussion. Perkinson's definition obtains wherever colonialism has left a legacy. But there are white people and there are white people; that is, as the scholarship on whiteness has demonstrated, whiteness has many expressions.[3] As mediated by gender, sexual orientation, class, region, physical ability, and the full range of the human condition, whiteness looks different at different times and places.[4] The question I want to explore is this: Are white Mennonite peacemakers in North America really different from other religious white people?

As I spent more time outside the Mennonite community, I became aware that white Mennonites are not unique. I listened to Unitarian Universalists describe deep resistance among their most progressive white congregants. I heard Roman Catholics attest to the "scotosis" or blindness of white Catholics "to White privilege. . . ."[5] I read historian Carolyn Dupont's unveiling of white southern evangelicals' penchant for white supremacy, and encountered a similar acceptance of white power among contemporary evangelicals through the work of sociologists Christian Smith and Michael

[1] W.E. Burghardt DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York: Humanity Books, 1920), 56; Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 33.

[2] James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 14.

[3] Charles W. Mills, "Racial Exploitation and the Wages of Whiteness," in *The Changing Terrain of Race and Ethnicity*, ed. Maria Krysan and Amanda E. Lewis (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 246.

[4] Pamela Perry, *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identities in High School* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2002), 5; John Hartigan, *Odd Tribes: Toward a Cultural Analysis of White People* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), 14-15.

[5] Alex Mikulich, "Mapping 'Whiteness': The Complexity of Racial Formation and the Subversive Moral Imagination of the 'Motley Crowd,' " *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 25, no. 1 (2005): 101.

Emerson.[6]

However, I also came to realize that, if not unique, white Mennonite peacemakers brought a particular, conflicted identity to the work of anti-racism, an oxymoron of sorts. The term "White Mennonite" itself reveals the tension. Historian, activist, and sage Vincent Harding plumbed the depths of that contradiction at the 1967 Mennonite World Conference when he observed that "Sometimes . . . we clearly control the power, subtle power, like the power of Mennonite prestige, the power of middleclass respectability, the power of whiteness. Can we recommend the way of powerlessness while we dwell comfortably among the powerful?"[7] Harding recognized a debilitating tension arising from the juxtaposition of an identity based on power and privilege with an identity based on self-sacrifice and humility.

I contend that white Mennonite peacemakers can foster integrity for their witness by coming to terms with three legacies of whiteness that have shaped white Mennonites' theology, service, and peacemaking.

I begin with theology. As Perkinson notes, "the problem with white theological talk is that it is almost always about race without ever mentioning race."[8] More specifically, following James Cone, the fundamental notion of salvation itself—that is, our soteriology—has in modernity been directly linked with whiteness.[9] Paraphrasing Cone, Perkinson states that "whiteness has functioned in modernity as a surrogate form of 'salvation,' a mythic presumption of wholeness."[10] Although we draw from a rich Anabaptist conception of salvation that has often linked spirituality and economics, we who are white must come to terms with our history of presenting ourselves as the models for others' salvation.[11] Like the rest of white society, our conception of a white Jesus has promoted a "sacred whiteness [that] stretched

[6] Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2013), 7; Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 76.

[7] Vincent Harding, "The Peace Witness and Revolutionary Movements," *Mennonite Life*, October 1967, 164.

[8] Perkinson, *White Theology*, 190.

[9] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 49.

[10] Perkinson, *White Theology*, 3.

[11] Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Newton, KS: Herald Press, 2010), 45-46.

back in time thousands of years and forward in sacred space to heaven and the second coming."[12] We are in need of saving from our own conception of salvation.

As to service, white Mennonite peacemakers have participated, and do participate, in selfless enterprises of disaster response, famine relief, technological development, and documentation of sexual abuse and historical trauma. Yet within the most popular forms of short-term service, those that draw volunteers to distant locales, the whiteness of kindness remains. Kindness as an expression of service dampens systemic analysis, focuses on interpersonal relationships, and is largely one-way in its orientation.[13] Riddled with white privilege, short-term service of this variety sends those with power and privilege to save those without such benefits. The model simply cannot address this power disparity and, as such, satisfies only the interests of those who serve. Even though leaders from communities of color have—for at least a decade now—identified multiple problems with short-term mission service projects, the industry that supports such ventures has been unable or unwilling to stop. Back in 2001, Texas A&M historian Felipe Hinojosa wrote a trenchant critique, and in the late 1990s my colleague Regina Shands Stoltzfus and I proposed a moratorium on short-term mission service projects that got us called on the carpet but did not lead to substantive change.[14]

In addition to influencing service and theology, whiteness has also shaped our peacemaking. The question is not *whether* white Mennonites engage in peacemaking—many do and have for centuries—but *how* they do so. Although a new sophistication is emerging as resources on conflict

[12] Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2012), 8.

[13] Tobin Miller Shearer, "The Problem of Kindness—Christian Fresh Air Missions and the Dynamics of Christian Whiteness," *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 6, no. 3 (2015): http://childhoodandreligion.com/issues/volume-6-2015/.

[14] Felipe Hinojosa, et al., "Stories of Protest about Short-Term Mission," *The Mennonite*, July 3, 2001, 15-16; Regina Shands Stoltzfus and I proposed a short-term service moratorium to Mennonite youth conference ministers and denominational personnel at a seminar in Orlando, Florida, in 1997. I rearticulated those ideas in Tobin Miller Shearer, "Bag the Baggage: Ten Ways to Shuck the Weight of Short-Term Missions," *With*, July/August 2002, 8-11, and Tobin Miller Shearer, "When Doing Good Does Bad," *With*, July/August 2002, 20-23.

transformation, the doctrine of discovery, and other post-colonial criticism gain a wider audience, peacemaking in the Mennonite church continues to be burdened by unacknowledged privilege. My point here is that white peacemakers in North America cannot be effective without understanding their white identity and taking it into account when engaged in peacemaking enterprises.

And now for grace. How does grace fit into a discussion of the contradictions of white Mennonite peacemakers? Let me start with a quotation from womanist poet Audre Lorde: "Once we recognize what it is we are feeling, once we recognize we can feel deeply, love deeply, can feel joy, then we will demand that all parts of our lives produce that kind of joy." Although Lorde wrote primarily to women of color, I have wondered what this sentiment could mean if applied to white people. What would it mean for me as a white person to love white people so deeply as to produce joy even while naming white identity as grounded in superiority, racism, privilege, and exclusion? Myles Horton, the white director of the Highlander Center, the famed civil rights movement training institution, offers a way forward. "Your job as a gardener or as an educator is to know that the potential is there and that it will unfold," he has said. "You have to posit trust in the learner in spite of the fact that the people you're dealing with may not, on the surface, seem to merit that trust. . . . And in order to do this, you have to start with people where they are without losing sight of where you want them to go."[15]

However, this is a precarious insight. North American society has been structured to make white people—white, straight, able-bodied men in particular—feel comfortable, affirmed, included, and accepted. As a result, grace can be problematic. I remember a white workshop participant who, after only a few days of training, asked people of color to offer him a measure of grace for the mistakes he had already made and those he would make in the future. They explained that they had been offering grace to white people for centuries and it was time for something different. As author Drew Hart has pointed out, "Very frequently, racial exchange solely happens under the terms and conditions of white people, which in itself is already an act of

[15] Helen Fox, "*When Race Breaks Out": Conversations About Race and Racism in College Classrooms* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 84-85.

reaffirming the racialized hierarchy."[16] Demanding grace from people of color in this way only serves to perpetuate white dominance and control.

So, the question is not whether or not to love white people, but how best to do so. In particular, I wonder how best to love white Mennonite peacemakers. Ethicist Alex Mikulich put it this way: "Walking the way of the cross . . . means setting foot on a journey filled with tensions, contradictions, doubts, fears, [as we] acknowledge and subvert our participation in structures of privilege and exclusion and walk with our brothers and sisters through the radical and loving transformation of the cross of Jesus."[17]

I spend my days mostly working with white people on racism. The university where I teach is populated with white students who, along with some Black and Native students, show up in my classes. Thus I am constantly challenged to teach where students have little sophistication about, experience in, or awareness of the way race works in society. In that setting, I do my best to create a learning environment that is not centered on guilt, does not engage in individual shaming, and places the expectation that—regardless of where they grew up or what experiences they have had—students can develop the skills and analysis needed to respond with alacrity and precision to racism when they see it. Some days go better than others.

While preparing this essay, I encountered a photo of two white young men wearing T-shirts that exclaimed "Trump Wall**!**", a reference to the proposal by then Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump to build a wall between the US and Mexico. The young men were chanting "Build the Wall, Build the Wall" at a town hall meeting on Saturday, April 2, 2016, in Rothschild, Wisconsin. The duo did not so much look angry as gleeful, ardent, fanatical. I don't think they could have been more than sixteen or seventeen at most.

In the end, I most desire that white Mennonite peacemakers resolve our internal contradictions so that we can reach an audience made up of "Trump Bros." This is not a new thought. In 1968, historian and activist Vincent Harding wrote "The History of a Wall," a reference to a different kind of wall, the wall of racial separation. "The wall was high and hard, and lives

[16] Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2016), 23.
[17] Mikulich, "Mapping 'Whiteness,'" 117.

continued to be shattered against it," he wrote. "More and more persons were growing bitter and impatient, not simply against the wall itself but against the millions of Americans who by their empathy and passive cooperation allowed it to stand."[18] He challenged white Mennonites to affect the lives of those white Americans whose "empathy and passive cooperation" kept that wall standing. Might there be a role for white Mennonite peacemakers to enter the spaces where Trump Bros thrive, to learn of their fears, to offer an alternative?

I return now to that anti-racism training meltdown at MCC, because I have not yet described how it ended. During a break before the final session, tornado sirens began to wail. As the sky turned green around us, we crammed into a basement room and stood cheek to jowl, tense and irritable, awaiting the storm to pass. The anger, resentment, and frustration from the past three days of training swirled through the room like the winds outside. And then, for a few minutes, amid a common desire for right relationship and restored communion—for these are also the deepest desires of white Mennonite peacemakers—we prayed and spoke together.

Of course, that wasn't the end of the story. In many ways, that training marked a fissure in the relationship between Damascus Road Anti-Racism Process staff and MCC that eventually led to Damascus Road's departure. Yet the struggle of working with white Mennonite peacemakers on anti-racism leaves me with two hopes.

The first hope is that white Mennonite peacemakers will find ways to name, confront, and gain the resources for dealing with the internal contradiction of whiteness. And, by doing so, that they will gain the integrity to use that power and privilege in an appropriate manner. As womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas maintains, "the important work [for white people] is showing up at the places of injustice to add your supporting voice and body and use your power (rather than lay aside your power) to overturn injustice and give witness to the justice of God."[19]

The second hope is that white Mennonite peacemakers find ways to reach people like the two young Trump supporters. Such a significant,

[18] Vincent Harding, "The History of a Wall," *Gospel Herald*, June 18, 1968, 545.

[19] As paraphrased by Rick Hudgens in a personal reflection from Douglas's April 6, 2016, lecture at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago.

essential, and risky contribution could play a small role in dismantling the systems of oppression raging in our world. It would require plenty of grace to do so—not so much the kind of grace that asks for cheap forgiveness, to paraphrase Dietrich Bonhoeffer—but the kind that recognizes one's brokenness within and, through that brokenness, aims to connect with the brokenness in the world. It is the more difficult path, to see working class, rural, and suburban neighborhoods as one's field of endeavor. There is no glamor associated with it. I am aware of that every morning that I walk into class in Missoula, Montana. But I am hopeful. Because of the struggle born of tornado trainings, I remain hopeful.

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