



A Sacred Conversation on Race — Theological Perspectives

Herbert Perkins and Margery Otto, © 2007

A Sacred Conversation on Race must be explicit about the vocation of each person in the conversation to realize his and her call to relationship. The objective of the conversation is to discern what it means to be in relationship and what it is about racism that destroys our will and capacity for relationship. Those engaged in this conversation must reflect on this calling based on the following considerations that are made explicit in an interfaith context.

Yahweh brings each part of creation into relation with every other part. In spirit, everything is related. The power of relationship that connects all creation is sacred. Yahweh calls all creation into this sacred relationship and promises all peoples to be present to them and to act with steadfast love toward them—generously and graciously liberating them from oppression.

In the many stories told, Yahweh is shown to be a convener, a creator of community, convening and constituting people as an assembly (*qahal* translated as *ekklesia*). The basic relationship between Yahweh, the Holy One, and humanity is realized in assembly, “a circle,” where all are gathered together to make a covenant of loyalty (*hesed*), service, mutual provision, and the dispensing of justice (Judges 20: 1-2, Nehemiah 8: 1-12, 2 Kings 23: 1-3, 21). In Yahweh’s “circle,” people are brought together to speak, listen, be challenged, judge and be judged, and be reconciled, and, having been transformed by the experience, to go forth to live and enact justice.

This assembly of Yahweh is not just for the Hebrew people but for all people—“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food

filled with marrow, of well aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples...” (Isaiah 25: 6-10). In response, Yahweh requires people to remove all systems of poverty and oppression, creating the same relationship of generosity, grace and justice among themselves as a human community as Yahweh has formed with them (Isaiah 58: 1-12). The “shroud” of non-recognition brings separation and death. In the light of relationship as being cast in Yahweh’s image—*imago dei*—in light of all children being of the same parent, all people are to recognize their common humanity.

The calling to relationship, though anchored in the concept of *imago dei*, extends beyond this support. Our calling as humans is to be Yahweh’s incarnate co-creators, creating relationships with *all that is*. Embodying Yahweh’s sacred style of relationship, we are responsible (response-able) for giving concrete form to Yahweh’s justice, generosity and grace in this world and for upholding the value of each component part within the holy system of relationship.

A sacred conversation on race is a call to human relationship. Through the conversation followed up by study—ideally a Study Circle, the partners in the conversation are able to discern what is required of them and to respond to this call. On an individual level, this call is lived out through our involvement with the communities, institutions and people in our life-space. This call cannot be realized, however, in a context of individualism; it can only be realized in community. This is because we are not just connected to others; we are constituted through our relationship with others (Paul Rasor 2005:162). Because this is so, we are accountable to each other

for mutual, interactive formation. We form each other. Moreover, to be a complete human being, “inter-relationality” must become an aspect of our self-understanding, directing us in the ways we act in the world. In antiracism work, instanced in this Conversation About Race, we acknowledge our mutual accountability to create a society where relationship is possible by enacting that society among ourselves.

The living-out of the call to antiracism occurs through mutual discernment and empowerment. Together we ask: What is the situation about us? How are we implicated? Who are we? What do we stand for? What needs to be done? What resources within and among us do we have to respond to what the situation and the vocational call of us? As communities and as individuals—as a Circle—we engage this discernment process through community- and relationship-building, and through study, dialogue, truth-telling, action and reflection.

There is another aspect to this call to relationship anchored in Scriptural prophetic witness: right relationship demands that we correct injustice. Racism personifies injustice. It is an affront to humanity and a human’s rightful claim to relationship. In response, the work of the conversation is to identify and engage the conversational partners in an ethic based on Luke 4:16-21, proclaiming the Jubilee of “the year of the Lord’s favor” where justice is reestablished in the lifting of people from oppression and the recovery of sight. This we see involving: 1) right relationship; (2) care of one another—responsibilities, duties, mutuality; (3) denunciation and elimination of all forms of exploitation (domination and oppression); (4) correction of injustice through rescue/resistance and rebuke/reparations; and (5) self-analysis and self-correction, realizing that justice is always incomplete and partial—it is always in need of Jubilee (political emancipation and economic restructuring). This ethic may be summarized in stating that “justice consists primarily in liberation from oppression and in ‘new beginnings’ that undo oppressive structures” (Lebacqz 1994: 258).

As already noted Luke presents Jesus’ ethic as being based in *Jubilee*. In Luke, the Jubilee of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind (spiritual renewal), and lifting of oppression, all given as a favor, is offered to all willing to receive it. In Luke’s account, some who hold historical claims of priority and privilege, scandalized by the “commonness” of Jesus, refuse

the offer of this year of favor (Luke 4:22). Perhaps, they recognize that this “favor” to the poor and oppressed will demand their letting go of property claims. Jesus reminds them of Elijah and Elisha who turned from offering assistance to Israel to offer outcast gentiles a favor of food and cure from disease. By implication, Jesus, experiencing rejection of the Nazareth privileged, offers his “year of the Lord’s favor” to social outcasts. This account of Jesus’ visit to Nazareth and his proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favor,” for Luke is the central motif of Jesus’ mission. The gospel of Luke as a whole and the Lucan Jubilee image, in particular, offer an ethic for social ministry (Yoder 1994:74). “The Jubilee is not simply a theological concept providing insight into the nature of God; it is a guide for living which is to be observed in normal daily practice among believers. ...These Jubilee acts are not simply to be expected in the future; they are to be given concrete expression among the people of God in the present” (74). As norms for behavior, the Jubilee acts are ethical prescriptions. A Conversation About Race needs to be a Jubilee act, proclaiming a moment of favor to the oppressed and the oppressor, an offer of grace to reconstruct relationships.

The gospel of Luke as a whole offers a model for doing antiracism work as an ethic—a norm for moral behavior (See John H. Yoder 1994: *The Politics of Jesus*). First, there is a proclamation of a new order, good news about a Jubilee year where debt will be forgiven, captives set free, oppression lifted, blindness replaced by sight (understanding). Second, a visible, structured fellowship is created—a Study Circle created for dialogue and study (Luke 6:12). Third, as the Circle fellowship matures, members make a sober acknowledgement that the costs of commitment to the fellowship have been consciously accepted (Luke 12:49-13:9, 14:25-36). In doing so, they take on themselves the potential hostility of society as their due for threatening society by creating a new kind of community leading to a radically new way of relating. And, forth, Circle members assume a clearly defined life-style distinct from that of the crowd—committing to a norm of humaneness and empathy. This life-style carries a nonconformist quality of ways they involve themselves in the world, in the ways they promote socio-political, economic restructuring of relations in the wider community, and in the way they live a social life ordered by the ethic of Jubilee, according to an ethic of favor and freedom for all peoples and nations.

