

Why Anti-Racism Will Fail

by Thandeka

Two events compel me to make a public statement against the anti-racist theology and programs of our association. The first event occurred two years ago, when General Assembly passed a resolution calling upon the UUA, its congregations, and its community organizations to become anti-racist, multi-cultural institutions – terms that have a special meaning and history in our Unitarian Universalist context. To this end, the UUA Board of Trustees was urged to establish a committee to monitor and assess this process.

The second event occurred last spring when Bill Murry, president of Meadville/Lombard Theological School, asked me to present a public lecture at GA on my new book *Learning to be White: Money, Race, and God in America*. I accepted this invitation, knowing I would have to speak out against an official UUA program, something I do with great reluctance. But otherwise, my own work might be mistranslated at GA into yet another talk about white racism. As I hope to show, such racial talk is

counterproductive to the social justice mission of the real religious vision of our religious movement.

And so I must begin my remarks with a critique of the anti-racist programs described by the “Journey Toward Wholeness Path to Anti-Racism,” the information packet developed by the UUA’s Faith in Action Department for Diversity and Justice. The packet itemizes the steps we need to take to develop an anti-racist UU identity, none of which we’re told, can be skipped if one wishes to become an anti-racist. The first step is to take an anti-racism training workshop led by an authorized trainer.

I took one of these workshops and read the accompanying material. As a result of these experiences, I learned three things:

- One. All whites in America are racists.
- Two. No blacks in American are racist. They’re prejudiced just like everybody else, but they lack the power of institutional resources to force other racial groups to submit to their will. Thus they can’t be racist because racism in this conceptual scheme is defined as prejudice + power.
- Three. Whites must be shown that they are racists and confess their racism.

Based on my experiences of the training and on my work with some of the anti-racism advocates at the UUA on a racial and cultural diversity task force, I concluded that the anti-racist strategies have three basic problems:

- First. They violate the first principle of our UU covenant together to actively affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Second. They make an erroneous assumption about the nature and structure of power in America; and
- Third, they misinterpret actions resulting from feelings of shame and powerlessness as evidence of white racism.

In more detail:

Problem #1: The UUA's anti-racist programs tend to violate the first principle of our covenant together.

Evidence. Anti-racists assume that congregations and their leadership mirror -- and I use the anti-racist language here -- the larger society's racism by excluding people of color as well as other socially oppressed groups such as gays and lesbians, people with disabilities,

“Third World citizens, etc., through their often unexamined policies, practices, teachings, and decisions.

What these anti-racists fail to notice is that most of our thousand or so churches are closed to virtually everyone regardless of race, color, class, or creed. Half our churches have fewer than 250 members. A great many of them function as clubs. A case in point. One white friend told me that the former white minister of his UU church left after the congregation met to decide whether he should be ordered to shave off his new beard.

Rather than recognize that our congregants often find all difference threatening, anti-racists conclude that these congregations stay small and virtually all white because of the members' racism. With the caricature in place that the congregants are, like all whites, racists, the antiracists then, through careful and protracted training, call upon these congregants to confess their racism. Thus the anti-racists have created what they describe -- Whites who have learned to think of themselves as racists.

The theological principle behind all this is expressed in Joseph Barndt's book, *Dismantling Racism: The Continuing Challenge to White America*, which was sent to me, complements of the UUA anti-racism program to reinforce the lessons of the anti-racism workshop. Barndt, a

white Lutheran minister, conducts anti-racism trainings for the UUA.

Barndt's belief that all whites are racists is based explicitly on the Christian doctrine of original sin, which claims that through Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden human nature was corrupted -- a doctrine linked to the Trinitarian claim that only through the death of Jesus and with the assistance of the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit can human nature be saved. In every age, Christian theologians have found new language to explain this doctrine. The anti-racist doctrine is just a recent example.

As Unitarian Universalists we reject this doctrine in its pure form, but we have inadvertently brought it into our midst by using anti-racist rhetoric informed by Barndt's Christian dogma.

Barndt, for example, tells us we're "Enslaved by sin and freed by grace," -- classic Christian Trinitarian language. In other words, only a Savior can free us from sin and human imperfection because we humans lack agency to help ourselves. Following this Christian doctrine to its logical conclusion, he thus urges whites to seek forgiveness for their racism and, to quote him verbatim, face the fact that "our [meaning whites'] unwitting and unwilling imprisonment in racism . . . *continues even after we have repented,*

confessed, and been forgiven." [45]

In short, 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.”

Lacking all agency, they thus can’t effect their own salvation. In short, they need a savior. And in the Barndt theology, this savior isn’t Jesus but, in a brash leap, “people of color.” Listen to what he says:

“Leadership and direction can only come from [people of color because they] understand racism far better than we do, and they know what needs to be done to eliminate it. Thus, the first step toward breaking the chains of this prison [for white people] is to recognize that we cannot be in charge of the changing” [99].

When it comes to specifics, though, Barndt and his colleagues call for no other action on the part of the white sinner except confession. Surely the moral passivity advocated by such a theology is one reason why anti-racism programs can claim so few concrete results.

Further, the doctrine of human helplessness goes against the entire sweep of our religious traditions. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm

human moral agency and reject the orthodox, Protestant trinitarian dogma that makes the crucifixion of Jesus the justification for our salvation in the eyes of God. The first principle of our covenant together is a pointed rejection of this Christian doctrine of original sin. Rather than affirming that human nature is corrupt, we celebrate it as inherently worthwhile and filled with dignity. This affirmation sets aside the need for a Messiah to sacrifice himself to redeem a corrupted nature.

William Ellery Channing declared as much in his 1819 sermon “Unitarian Christianity,” which Unitarian Church Historian Conrad Wright calls, “our party platform.” Listen to what Channing said in this sermon that marked Unitarianism as a distinct religion from its orthodox Trinitarian kin. Channing, of course, uses the non-inclusive language of his era:

“all virtue has its foundation in the moral nature of man, that is, in conscience, or his sense of duty, and in the power of forming his temper and life according to conscience [No act is praiseworthy, any farther than it springs from their exertion. We believe, that no dispositions infused into us without our own moral activity, are of the nature of virtue, and therefore, we reject the doctrine of irresistible divine influence on the human mind, molding it into goodness, as

marble is hewn into a statue” [79-80].

In our tradition, we are always active agents in our own salvation. This is core to our teaching as Unitarian Universalists. So why have we accepted a doctrine of race that indicts 95% of our congregants as helpless, passive sinners?

To answer this question, we have to turn to the second problem I have found in UU anti-racist strategies: the errant assumption that white America works for white Americans. Any one who cares to look will quickly discover that it doesn't – at least, not for the vast majority of them. The privilege that, according to the anti-racists, that comes with membership in white America, actually belongs to a tiny elite. Let me illustrate this point.

Imagine that business and government leaders decreed that all left-handed people must have their left hand amputated. Special police forces and armies are established to find such persons and oversee the procedure. University professors and theologians begin to write tracts to justify this new policy. Soon the right-handed begin to think of themselves as having right-hand privilege. The actual content of this privilege, of course, is negative: it's the privilege of not having one's left hand cut off. The privilege, in short, is the avoidance of being tortured by the ruling elite.

To speak of such a privilege – if we must call it that – is not to speak of power but rather of powerlessness in the midst of a pervasive system of abuse-- and to admit that the best we can do in the face of injustice is duck and thus avoid being a target.

My point is this. Talk of white skin privilege is talk about the way in which some of the citizens of this country are able to avoid being mutilated – or less metaphorically, having their basic human rights violated

So much for the analogy. Here are the facts about so-called white skin privilege.

First, 80 percent of the wealth in this country is owned by 20 percent of the population. The top 1 percent owns 47% of this wealth. These facts describe an American oligarchy that rules not as a right of race but as a right of class. One historical counterpart to this contemporary story of extreme economic imbalance is found in the fact that at the beginning of the Civil War, seven per cent of the total white population in the South owned almost three quarters (three million) of all the slaves in this country. In other words, in 1860, an oligarchy of 8,000 actually ruled the South.¹ This small planter class ruled over the slaves and controlled the five million whites too poor to own slaves. To make sense of this class fact, we must

remember that the core motivation for slavery was not race but economics, which is why at its inception, both blacks and whites were enslaved.

Second, let us not forget the lessons of the 1980s. As former Republican strategist Kevin Phillips reminds us in his book *The Politics of Rich and Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath*, “For all workers, white-collar as well as blue-collar, their real average weekly wage – calculated in constant 1977 dollars – fell.

Third, let us also not forget that today, numerous companies are opting to lower standards for job qualifications for their work force rather than raise wages and thus cut into profits.² Jobs paying \$50,000 a year or more have twice the share of the job-loss that they did in the 1980s.

The result of these contemporary economic trends is the most acute job insecurity since the Great Depression. As economist Paul Krugman has pointedly argued in the November 3, 1997, edition of the *New Republic*, the modern success story of America’s booming economy rests on the bent back of the American wage earners. The economy is booming because wages, the main component of business costs, are not going up. And wages are not going up because the American worker is presently too

fearful to stand up and make demands. Downsizing has shaken worker confidence. Unemployment insurance last only a few months, and the global labor market has undermined the American worker's bargaining power. These basic economic facts, Krugman argues, have created one basic psychological fact for the typical American worker: anxiety.

A strong economy no longer means job security for most white middle-class Americans -- and they know it. This awareness, however, has not produced a rebellion against the rich but, rather, frenzied attempts by downwardly mobile middle-class whites to keep up the appearance of being well-being. Such appearances, however, include a penalty: debt. As social theorist Juliet B. Schor reminds us in *The OverSpent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer*:

- between a quarter and 30 percent of all American households live paycheck to paycheck;
- In 1995, one-third of families whose heads were college-educated did no saving; and
- In 1995, the median value of household financial assets was a mere \$9,950.³

I do not call this economic condition in white America, white skin privilege. I call it white middle-class poverty. Talk of white skin privilege is a distraction from this pervasive problem in white America. Talk of white privilege, to paraphrase a statement of Martin Luther King Jr. can feed the egos of poorer whites but not their stomachs.⁴

So why have white UU's accepted a doctrine of race theory that is economically naïve, sociologically counterfactual, and racially damning? The answer is that by and large we haven't. In so far as we have, it's because the talk of privilege inflates some egos.

Unitarian Universalists, as we know, are the second wealthiest religious group in the country. We're also the most highly educated. This means that 49.9 per cent of us are college graduates and that our median annual household income for us is \$34,800.

In other words, members of our association tend to have a big brain and a small purse. UU's also tend to be politically active, environmentally conscious, nature-oriented, and live in the suburbs. This is not the profile of the power elite. It's the profile of civil servants, school teachers, small business persons, and middle managers. In effect, Middle America – the group of professionals who keep America running by training its children,

maintaining government, and paying taxes.

Two hundred years ago, the Unitarian part of our tradition had a very different profile, as Conrad Wright notes in his essay “Ministers, Churches, and the Boston Elite.” Between 1791 and 1820, Unitarianism was called “the faith of the well-to-do, urban New Englanders.” Harriet Beecher Stowe noted in the 1820s [that], “All the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarians. All the trustees and professors of Harvard College were Unitarians. All the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches.” Calvinist Jedidiah Morse described his liberal opponents as “a formidable host...combining wealth talents and influence.”

But that was then and this is now. Today, most Unitarian Universalists are not affluent. Yet we seem fond of describing ourselves in this manner. We find this hinted at even in the Commission on Appraisal’s 1997 report on congregational polity, *Interdependence*, which relates one of church historian Tex Sample’s generalizations about the cultural left: “They are mostly affluent.” The members of the Commission go on to tell us that Sample’s description is in general quite consistent with the demographic and psychographic profiles of the members of our association. I am increasingly persuaded that most of us do indeed

imagine we're well off. I'm also persuaded that some of us impoverish ourselves trying to live out this myth of our lives.

The truth is that to be white in America and not affluent is for many persons -- embarrassing. No contemporary writer has chronicled the story of this middle-class shame better than Harvard social critic Juliet B. Schor in her book *The Overspent American*. Schor notes that if debts are subtracted from assets, the typical middle-class American household's net worth is less than \$10, 000. Does this mean that even though almost three-quarters of UU's own their homes, their net worth might still rank a great many of them as members of America's middle-class poor? I suspect so.

Most middle-class white persons, UU's included, are not part of the economic ruling elite in this country. They have not amassed structural power and control. Our UU anti-racist rhetoric, however, claims that they have. Such a claim seems to produce three kinds of ego responses in white UU's. For some, it is an ego boost. Bereft of real power and prestige in the eyes of America's ruling elite, what a tweak of the ego to have a so-called person of color tell you that you are all-powerful. Who could resist? Loads.

Thus the second category. Some egos are deflated. Those of whites

who are not racists, but have sometimes acted in racist ways in order to retain membership in their own social groups. I will use a story from my new book to make this point about a minister I will call Dan. Although Dan is not a Unitarian Universalist, but a well-heeled Boston Presbyterian minister, I will use his story because he is much like the many goodhearted liberal white UU's I have met who are neither white supremacists nor racists.

One day, over lunch, Dan recounted an experience that helped shape his racial identity as a white. In college during the late 1950s, Dan joined a fraternity. With his prompting, his chapter pledged a black student. When the chapter's national headquarters learned of this first step toward integration its ranks, headquarters threatened to rescind the local chapter's charter unless the black student was expelled. The local chapter caved in to the pressure and Dan was elected to tell the black student member he would have to leave. Dan did it. "I felt so ashamed of what I did," he told me, and he began to cry. "I have carried this burden for forty years," he said. "I will carry it to my grave."

The couple at the next table tried not to notice Dan's breakdown. The waiter avoided our table. As Dan regained his composure, I retained mine. I could see his pain. I felt empathy for his suffering but was troubled by his lack of courage. Dan's tears revealed the depth of the compromise he had made with himself rather than risk venturing beyond the socially mandated strictures of whiteness.

I realized that being white for Dan was not a matter of racist conviction but a matter of survival, not a privilege but a penalty: the pound of flesh exacted for the right to be excluded from the excluded. Dan's tears revealed the emotional price of his ongoing membership in the "white" race.

Although he is not a racist, Dan might make a confession of racism to a UUA anti-racism trainer because this would be the only way to mollify the trainer and also because *racism* is the only category he would have to express a deeper loss and regret: his stifled feelings and blunted desires for a more inclusive community. But Dan did not cry during our lunch together in the restaurant because he was a racist. He cried because his impulses to moral action had been slain by his own fear of racial exile.

The anti-racist charge of white racism gives persons like Dan a way of addressing their moral failure of nerve without having to face a harder

truth that they acted in racist ways not because they were racist but because they were afraid of being rejected. The charge of racism does not heal this condition or even describe it. It simply punishes a person for being broken.

The third group affected by anti-racist rhetoric I will call the silent majority. These Unitarian Universalists know that the anti-racist rhetoric that pervades our religious association runs counter to the economic realities of this country and their own lives. I believe that these persons simply dismiss the rhetoric as insulting to their intelligence and walk away. This doesn't help us build a strong, vibrant religious community. Quite the contrary. This is the way in which our community is broken. One withdrawal at a time.

Enough. This anti-racist rhetoric and its fall out must be stopped. I have three suggestions.

First, read. Start reading groups in your local congregations that will help you figure out how to talk sensibly about the link between race and class in America. Learn how the creation of the so-called white in this country was a means to exploit this person's labor. Discover what white Americans have in common with other people of color and work on a

language that takes into account the fact that the racial socialization process in this country makes all of us racial victims.

Second, empathize. Learn to replace moral judgment with loving compassion. All of us have made decisions and acted in ways that compromise our moral integrity. Use our collective power as religious movements to help each of us heal our crippled ability to relate with the full integrity of our humanity. Create new rituals in your Sunday services that allow persons to feel the healing power of a beloved community.

Third, Organize. Build coalitions using your new vocabulary and your new commitment to empathize and work with other UU congregations and other liberal religious groups who are also tired of race-talk separated from talk about class issues. I believe that we have the power to transform America because of who we are: We are Middle-America. Transform this group and you transform the country because we are the majority. All we need is the moral courage to practice what we preach. And we will generate this moral courage through love.

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880* (1935; reprint, Cleveland:

Meridian Books 1964), 26. (See Herman Schlueter, *Lincoln, Labor and Slavery (1913)*, 86).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 20.

4. Ibid., 152.