

Thy Kingdom Come: Conceptualizing Christian Community and Difference in Postmodern Culture

Johnny B. Hill, Ph.D.

Presented at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Louisville, Kentucky

November 15-16, 2005

The language of race and privilege still enters at the rear door in the house of public discussion in our global and domestic neighborhoods. There is a sense in which it remains unfashionable to speak of race as a significant variable in perpetuating social, political and economic disparities. The conditions of 9/11 and contrived notion of a global war on terrorism has prompted a cultural attitude that views race and its haunting relationship to white privilege (in particular) as a thing of the past. However, close scrutiny would suggest that there is a distinctive relationship between racial disparities, global economics and mainstream politics. For the next few moments, I would like to share with you some of the critical issues that are shaping the way we think about race, privilege and even attempts at addressing racial/ethnic reconciliation and social justice today. Furthermore, how do such visions of community as seen in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of the 'beloved community' and Desmond Tutu's notion of the 'rainbow people of God' offer insights and constructive paths forward?

In the late 1990's, then President William Jefferson Clinton established a commission on race, chaired by the renowned historian John Hope Franklin. Essentially, the commission concluded (what many already knew), that racial identity still plays a major role in politics, economics and social life in America. The commission also found that the issue of race has become more complex in light of the changing dynamics of racial, ethnic and cultural difference. These differences have been accentuated by the expansion

of globalization and the treacherous growth of modern technology. Some have described these changes in the language of postmodern times. Postmodernity has been characterized by Gianni Vattimo as the “end of history,” or rather the end of Western philosophic hegemony of truth and knowledge. That is to say, in postmodern culture we see a heightened suspicion of rationality (science and technology) as the best path toward truth. The results of which are seen in a fracturing and fragmentation, not only of language, but of culture and communities as well. Because of how technology (mass communication, transportation systems, electronic communications, etc.) has brought incredibly diverse groups in close proximity, we observe how cultural, economic, ethnic and particularly religious and theological differences are more visible.

The emphasis on language, economics and cultural realities postmodern discourse provides a meaningful platform for considering the implications of King and Tutu’s thought. Firstly, a word must be said about what I mean by postmodernity and how it relates to the concerns voiced by King and Tutu, concerning the poor, powerless, and persecuted. Generally speaking, postmodernity, which should be distinguished from postmodernism, is considered a social and political condition generally marked by the end of the Cold War and Fordist economic systems into complex landscapes of exchange of religious, ethnic, and political ideas. It is understood as the emergence of globalization, rise of free trade and multinational corporations, generated by information based economy (i.e. information related occupations and production processes; a decline in mass production). These social, political and economic forces have come to shape the way in which language is construed and disseminated. This is brought into clearer view in the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, as he describes

postmodernity as the “incredulity toward metanarratives.” That is to say, there is a cultural and intellectual suspicion of universal truth claims; and embrace of multiple perspectives and fluidity. Lyotard shows how self-identity becomes fragmented; the formation of the self is conditioned by a continuous flow of technological language and information. Notions of truth and even theological reflection becomes consumed in a radical subjectivism that forever seeks the “new and improved.” The societal changes that occurred reconfigured the manner in which knowledge is both disseminated and received.¹ Reflected in the sciences and technologies, a new form of discourse was forged into existence, a language that has transformed the modes of production, mercantilization and commercialization.

Globalization has played a major role in shaping the conditions and context of postmodern culture even at the local level as we try to understand the dynamics of race and privilege operating in our communities. Globalization has been broadly understood as the convergence of local and global economic trading networks. With globalization, local community conditions are interlocked with grandiose economic exchanges. Globalization for Max Stackhouse refers to the “universalization of the influence of these authorities and regencies as they developed in the West.”² In an institutional sense, globalization is marked by global organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank, Vienna Conference on Human Rights, the Kyoto Conference on Ecology and Global Warming, International Monetary Fund (IMF). Institutions like

¹ Ibid., p. 3.

² Stackhouse, Max L. and Browning Don S., 2001, *The Spirit and the Modern Authorities*, Vol. 2, (Harrisburg Press International), p. 2.

these, and similar ones, are often characterized as having partial governmental and regulatory power on an international scale.³

The forces of globalization, technology, mass media, and militarism have complicated the nature of suffering both personally and collectively. Some have described the postmodern as the triumph of the vcr (or shall I say the DVD). Indirect participation in capitalism on the local level now carries global significance. Multinational corporations encourage the conditions for a consumptive culture that does not consider the category of suffering, by a worldview that actually refuses to suffer. To suffer is alienation, death, and antithetical to what it means to be human. Michael Budde, in *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries*, proposes that this problem was accentuated by the shift from a Fordist era (large manufacturing systems) to a post-Fordist information based society. Information technology now becomes the chief means of producing and sustaining wealth and economic prosperity. These factors also become the chief means of dispensing the reality of suffering from our language. Around the clock info-tainment, advertisements, and the ever new “reality tv show” seek to manufacture a consumptive disposition. As Budde writes, “Capitalism now needs high, even profligate, levels of consumer spending to function smoothly; were people to cease consuming once their basic needs were met, the system would collapse.”⁴ The relationship between capitalist dynamics of surplus-value and the libidinal dynamics of surplus-enjoyment is employed to discern the forces at work in the functions of capitalism. Coca-cola, of course, is the chief example of ‘surplus-value’ with its both alluring and destructive tendencies. It points to what Zizek describes as the “superego-

³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁴ Budde, Michael, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), p. 37.

paradox.”⁵ The empty promises of capitalism are seen in the market driven exploitation of the working poor and very poor. Zizek seeks to explain the pervasive and violent tendencies displayed within the dynamics of capitalism. Put more succinctly, *why do we continually desire that which we do not need, yet can never get enough of?* The legitimacy and integrity of what constitutes beauty, or the aesthetically pleasing, is undermined by the capitalist inclination to assign value. Notions of the good, beauty, goodness and truth become subjective within a rugged individualized framework.

(2) FRACTURING OF COMMUNITY AND JUSTICE

Community and Cultural Identity in West, Hall and Glissant

So the critical question is that in light of the complexities of postmodern culture, what informs understandings of community and otherness? In an age of globalization and the declining significance of nation-statehood, what does it mean to engage in the ministry of justice and reconciliation, particularly in local churches and communities? To address this question, it is critical to reflect upon the meaning of community and how persons are shaped and formed in relation to the other. Brief insights from Cornel West, Stuart Hall and Edouard Glissant provide the context for understanding theological perspectives and their implications for Christian faith communities.

Glissant, West, and Hall attempt to articulate a vision of community that is historically and culturally affirming and politically engaging. Of the three, West seems to offer the most rigorous attempt to deal with the philosophical presuppositions that support notions of community, especially in the postmodern era. The impact of globalization in shaping cultural and ethnic identity, in Hall’s analysis, challenges the postmodern subject to think

⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

in new ways about questions of nationhood. Hall's conception of community is seen as an ever-changing 'hybridity' constantly in tension with past and present identities. Using Derrida's idea of *differance*, Hall argues for a conception of community devoid of permanent notions of cultural identity.⁶ The binary oppositions, such as black/white, rich/poor, high/low, etc. produced exclusionary and oppressive hierarchical structures. Since the Caribbean constructions of cultural identity have been held hostage by 'foundational myths,' which promote continuity with an idealized past, a new understanding is needed, one that embraces difference. In Hall's analysis, the world is in a state of flux, primarily due to the reality of globalizations. The boundaries between nation-states are swiftly becoming devalued in light of transnational corporations and their demands for uniformity. The postmodern climate has created the need to rethink notions of cultural identity and nationhood. The Caribbean, for Hall in this regard, becomes the chief recipient of this imagined community.

Hall illustrates those forces attempting to undermine the sustained development of conceptions of black identity.⁷ Notions of identity are displaced because of the psychic unconscious realities that work in the everyday lives of cultural subjects. One cannot disassociate the psychological processes of the mind from the damaging social images of degradation. All language is somehow related to formerly existing linguistic structures of the sort. In short, it appears to reflect the biblical claim, "There's nothing new under the sun, such as common to man [humanity]." Of course, Hall establishes the fragmentation of identity to set the foundations of his conception of cultural identity as "hybridity."

⁶ Hall, "Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad."

⁷ Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," in *Radical America*, (Oct.-Dec., 1989), published June 1991, p. 10ff.

Glissant will also take up this theme of community, but focus on the particularities of the Martinican experience. The polemics of community for Glissant are observed in the form of nationalism and collective consciousness. Unlike Hall and West, Glissant places more emphasis on the aesthetic dimensions of cultural identity and its implications toward nationhood. He posits a sense of community that situates individual identity in relation to national bonds associated with struggle and liberation. Inasmuch as West and Hall seek to overcome the modern predicament in primarily linguistic and philosophical terms, Glissant wishes to develop an aesthetic epistemology that will liberate the mind and body of the Martinican. Described as “cross-cultured poetics,” Glissant maintains that art, music and novelic literature have the ability to communicate beyond traditional structures of modern linguistic discourse. Glissant made this observation in the Haitian experience. Because of the massive illiteracy of the populous of the day, the use of language was rendered unintelligible in developing a sense of cultural identity. It had to be seen, heard and felt. Certainly, this does not negate the import of language to Glissant’s agenda. On the contrary, Glissant attempts to reinterpret the meaning of language in light of the Martinican experience. Glissant opts for a ‘Caribbean discourse’ which is in touch with lived experience.

West’s conception of community carries several dimensions: (a) Afro-American religious expression; (b) a form of American pragmatism where truth is evaluated based on its efficacy to enact social change; and (c) prophetic social and political criticism. It is assumed in West that there is an agreed upon understanding of what is meant by ‘community.’ In one sense, West’s community responds to the persistent social and political strivings of African descents (in general) and American blacks in particular. In

his *Race Matters*, West discusses the problem of nihilism facing, as he describes, ‘black America.’ He attributes this sense of nihilism to the disintegration of important black institutions that once served as buffers between black life and nihilistic vulnerabilities.⁸ Here, West points to a *politics of conversion* forming the founding principles for addressing the problem. If black Americans hope to overcome this nagging disease of modernity, West declares there must be a deep sense of self-love and love for others.

Implicit in West’s thought on community is the presence of the Black Church. In an interview with Paul Ruffins, West highlights the issue of leadership as the fundamental matter that must be addressed in a confronting racial oppression in postmodernity. The Black Church, for West, does not encompass the totality of ‘community.’ Rather, he considers it an important aspect that holds tremendous promise for enacting radical transformation in black communities. Leadership, in the Black Church, then becomes a critical piece in developing communities that are transformative and prophetic. Recognizing that underneath the social problems of poverty, joblessness and the disintegration of civil institutions, the Black Church plays a critical role in the shaping of transformative democratic perspectives and developing holistic ministries of justice and reconciliation.

Theological Responses

Described by Daniel Bell as “technologies of desire,” these forces demand thinking differently about what constitutes justice and liberation. The situation King and Tutu faced was ostensibly a lack of equal access to democratic social, economic and political arenas. One of the basic presupposition behind King and Tutu’s theology was that there

⁸ West, Cornel, 1993, *Race Matters*, (Boston: Beacon Press).

were clear distinctions between the oppressed and oppressor. Indeed, the system of Jim Crow segregation in the South and apartheid in South Africa made these distinctions painfully apparent. However, the problem of individual consumptive practices that are exploited by many multinational corporations and free market capitalism now complicate and blur these lines. For instance, as Zizek indicated, individual retirement accounts, mutual funds, investment accounts, or even shopping at the local market, individuals or groups may knowingly or unknowingly participate in their own oppression. As Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton argued in *American Apartheid*, often discriminatory and exploitative practices by large multinational corporations perpetuate cycles of poverty and exacerbate the ghettoization of the poor.⁹ Consequently, it has led to a failure of public policy. Programs such as the Fair Housing Act (1968), Civil Rights Act (1964), and initiatives by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, though important, have been unable to respond to the incessant reality of urban poverty.¹⁰ William Julius Wilson has provided us with extensive evidence that within a postmodern context, economics plays a far greater role in the perpetuation of poverty among blacks far more than race.¹¹ That does not mean race is not a factor. In fact, as Wilson argues, African American and Hispanic American communities still absorb the brunt of

⁹ Massey, Douglas S., and Denton, Nancy A., 1993, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), pp. 83ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 186ff.

¹¹ See Wilson, William Julius, 1978, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions*, Second Edition, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press); *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1996); *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Acknowledging that Wilson, as a sociologist, embraces many of the rationalistic presuppositions of modernity and that his findings are subject to limitless scrutiny and potential problematic variables, his observations are nonetheless useful in understanding the complexities of the quest for liberation and justice in postmodernity. Although it may seem to contradict my earlier thesis that calls into question many of the assumptions regarding human rationality and individualism of modernity, Wilson's analysis supports an understanding of the poor that has been advanced in the work of liberation theologians like J. Deotis Roberts, Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino, Bonino Boff, and James Cone.

economic disparities. But the economic activities within the market forces now play a more significant role in sustaining and intensifying desperate conditions for the poor.

The interrelationship between globalization and economics has also heightened racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts. The fragmentation of theological and ideological differences, supported by the growth of global economic and technological systems, call for a revision of liberation and reconciliation. King, in particular, forecasted this mounting concern when he observed:

All inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors. This world-wide neighborhood has been brought into being largely as a result of the modern scientific and technological revolutions. The world of today is vastly different from the world of just one hundred years ago.¹²

King recognized that because of immeasurable economic and technological advances, the ways in which the world was being ordered was forever changed. He observed the freedom movements sweeping across Latin America, Africa, and Asia. King expressed that the world was shifting its basic outlook by calling into question many of the fundamental presuppositions about human nature and social ordering coming from Western Europe. As a response, he admonished that human survival “depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant to face the challenge of change.”¹³ He passionately summarizes this view when he writes:

The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world-wide brotherhood. Together we must learn to live as brothers or together we will be forced to perish as fools... We must work passionately and indefatigably to bridge the gulf between our scientific progress and our moral progress. One of the great problems of mankind is that we suffer from a poverty of spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually.¹⁴

¹² King, Martin Luther Jr., 1963, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock), p. 196.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

King sets the precedent for an approach to liberation and reconciliation that begins with a serious reflection on the relationship between theology and difference. While keeping the welfare of the poor and economically disenfranchised clearly in view, King's perspective paves the way for thinking about the quest for liberation and reconciliation in postmodernity.

Rather than concluding with a list of solutions, I would like to finish with a brief series of questions:

What is the significance of race in light of the complexities of global economics?

How do our own personal and collective economic practices relate to racial and economic disparities?