

Book Review

Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation, by Jennifer Harvey. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014. 262 pages.

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Adherents to the Bahá'í Faith are familiar with this verse from Bahá'u'lláh's writings: "In this Day whatsoever serveth to reduce blindness and to increase vision is worthy of consideration. This vision acteth as the agent and guide for true knowledge. Indeed in the estimation of men of wisdom keenness of understanding is due to keenness of vision" (*Tablets 35*).

There is "keenness of vision" in *Dear White Christians* for those of any faith, or none, who long to heal the schism between the races and achieve true justice for our dark-skinned brothers and sisters. Author Jennifer Harvey, associate professor of religion at Drake University and an ordained pastor in the American Baptist Churches, has produced a work that rigorously combines key notes from African American history with the responses from mainline Protestant and prophetic evangelical denominations to produce a detailed analysis of what has gone wrong. She answers with conviction, documentation, and insight the following question: Why, after so many decades of well-intentioned efforts, does eleven o'clock on

Sunday morning remain the most segregated hour for Christian America? And further, she identifies an alternate path toward achieving Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of the beloved community.

Justice and racial identity are squarely at the center of Harvey's revealing conclusion that as long as the racial divide is addressed through the lens of reconciliation (or the "reconciliation paradigm" as she names it), both healing and true unity will continue to elude not only Christians, but all of us who care. Healing can begin only after we light-skinned people look unflinchingly at our "white" racial identity and own it. As we do so, we are compelled to recognize not only the brutal past, but also the continued systemic injustices that trap our dark-skinned siblings. And if we truly seek justice for them, Harvey explains, the path forward should be focused on repairing the damage done. This calls for a new paradigm—that of reparations.

Harvey identifies the stunning omission in most efforts to achieve racial harmony as the failure to acknowledge the effects of racism on light-skinned people. Just as racism defines what it means to be dark skinned in America, it also reciprocally defines "whiteness." In a racially divided society, whiteness, like blackness, is a racial identity. To demonstrate, Harvey poses a question to her college students: Is it OK to say that "white is beautiful"? Of course it's not. White, in racial terms, denotes the dominant class that subjugates blacks and other

racialized minorities through systems of violence and oppression. Unlike the sympathetic statement “black is beautiful,” calling white “beautiful” can imply “an endorsement of white supremacy or a rallying cry for the Ku Klux Klan” (45).

According to Harvey, failure to embrace the history of white racial identity has allowed light-skinned people to ignore their complicity and violence (52). And because we have often not recognized our racial identity or attempted to deal with its implications, whiteness today describes a state of “profound moral crisis” and “conceptual chaos” (56, 45). She further explains that light-skinned Americans have consistently failed to “resist and refuse white supremacy” even though it permeates our history, our system of justice, our social institutions, and our habits (55).

We can thus conclude that, until the twin evils of preference and prejudice are purged from the fabric of our society—which justice demands—light-skinned people will continue unjustly to benefit materially from the legacy of white supremacy. Our whiteness, its privilege and supremacy, remain at the heart of racial alienation, and the moral work that has been ignored for too long must entail, at a minimum, transforming our unjust laws and institutions (62).

It’s because whiteness is at the core of what’s wrong between us that Harvey is able to show why, to date, the reconciliation paradigm guiding most Christian and secular efforts hasn’t

worked. Constructing through reconciliation a community in which justice prevails would require that each party bring their whole authentic selves to the process (45). Because light-skinned people, Christian or otherwise, can’t do this without first acknowledging the white supremacist moral crisis that defines our racial identity, our attempts at reconciliation have missed the mark. Healing between the races has stalled, if not regressed. To make progress, we must find an alternative to reconciliation that is appropriate for the current state of race relations.

That the dominant class is culturally blind to white racial identity has been proclaimed by black thinkers and organizations for decades, but the message has fallen upon mostly deaf white ears. Harvey shows that we have only to harken back to the demands of the Black Manifesto, first presented to white Christians in 1969, to understand that repair and repentance are considered essential steps, and always have been (108). In that document, black leaders advocated various measures for advancing their crusade for dignity and healing. Among these was the partial repayment, in the sum of 500 million dollars (15 dollars per person), of the vast wealth that had been extracted through the unpaid labor of dark-skinned people over the centuries (108). The manifesto was a clear call for making reparations on many fronts to those who were being victimized. Harvey implies that had these modest demands been heeded with humility and determination when first

presented, we might find our collective racialized selves in a very different place today.

So here we arrive at Harvey's conclusion and her prescription. She argues convincingly that to reconcile is not meaningful in the absence of repentance and reparation and that to aim for reconciliation in their absence is, at the very least, premature (243). However, under the alternative "reparations paradigm" that she advances, the steps going forward become clear. It is for communities of color to describe and name racial injustice wherever it exists (166). It is for whites to own their shameful history while actively working to eradicate systemic white supremacy (190).

In other words, the moral logic of reparations is justice. A debt has been incurred, it remains owed, and repayment of that debt is (morally) due. The moral logic of reparations is *decidedly not* charity or compassion. A reparations paradigm acknowledges that unjust material conditions structure the relationship between perpetrators and victims. It calls for bi-party participation in a process seeking justice. It insists that healing the relationship requires restructuring the material conditions through which the parties relate to one another.... Such healing work is particularly incumbent upon the harm-creators. (144-45)

Thus, she writes: "Accepting the legitimacy of a reparations paradigm, therefore, means fundamentally recognizing that the offending party has no grounds on which to dictate or

influence how the victimized party uses the redress" (145). Only a reparations paradigm brings the possibility of transformation for whites, and thus healing for them as well (235).

Harvey's analysis is based on adherence to divine law. It appeals to our allegiance to God and our love of our fellow man and not to practical, material, or social self-interest, nor to shaming or guilt. It appeals to our love of truth and justice. Similar to the Bahá'í concept of community building is Harvey's assertion that underlying any attempt at fashioning a society founded on spiritual principles must be a focus on the reformation of the individual:

Yet to the extent that reconciliation models see racial relationships as constituted primarily by a universal shared humanity, the embrace of which is needed to overcome division, they fail. The reconciliation paradigm holds out a beautiful vision but it too easily ignores the actual reality of racial relationships (154).

Like reconciliation, all parties have a stake in a reparations process. This is work that belongs to all of us. But rather than learning how to embrace our oneness, we need to describe with unrelenting clarity—and with all particularity and specificity—the moral realities that constitute our relations. The focus required is on the harm done (and continuing to be done) to the victim and unequivocally ceasing that harm and violence (154-55).

Realizing that Harvey rightly highlights the cause of the racial divide as one of criminal proportions, her impatience with a seeming feel-good placebo is understandable. Reconciliation, no matter how sincere or earnest on the part of whites, seems to call for their victims to adopt a state of amnesia or denial with regard to past and continuing violations and to then move on to forgiveness. In *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is quoted on this issue:

Just as forgiveness is one of the attributes of God's mercy, so is justice one of the attributes of His lordship. The canopy of existence rests upon the pole of justice and not of forgiveness. Thus, if a decree of amnesty were to be enacted henceforth in all countries, the whole world would soon be thrown into disarray and the foundation of human life would be shattered. Likewise, if the powers of Europe had not resisted the notorious Attila, he would not have left a single soul alive. (77:8)

He further writes: "In sum, the proper functioning of the body politic depends upon justice and not forgiveness" (77:9).

In light of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assessment, should not white Bahá'ís also consider that various forms of reparation—both material and spiritual—are needed if we are all to truly experience one another as brothers and sisters?

But perhaps that love cannot be an expectation or precondition in order for our repair work to begin. Nor can forgiveness. Both love and forgiveness must be freely given and freely accepted. It would seem that genuine respect, compassion, and moral outrage—rather than guilt or a sense of duty—must be present in some measure in order for whites to carry out an enduring and effective program of reparations.

In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander writes, "It is this failure to care, really care across color lines, that lies at the core of this system of control and every racial caste system that has existed in the U.S. or anywhere else in the world" (234). In the foreword to *The New Jim Crow*, Cornel West expands on Alexander's assertion: "Martin Luther King Jr. called for us to be lovestruck with each other, not colorblind toward each other. To be lovestruck is to care, to have deep compassion, and to be concerned for each and every individual, including the poor and vulnerable" (x). Finally, speaking at Howard University to a mixed race audience, 'Abdu'l-Bahá offered the following thoughts:

I pray that you attain to such a degree of good character and behavior that the names of black and white shall vanish.... I hope that you attain to such a high degree—and this is impossible except through love. You must try to create love between yourselves;

and this love does not come about unless you are grateful to the whites, and the whites are loving toward you, and endeavor to promote your advancement and enhance your honor. This will be the cause of love. Differences between black and white will be completely obliterated; indeed, ethnic and national differences will all disappear. (*Promulgation* 46)

As a Bahá'í living in metropolitan Detroit, I've consciously looked for ways to make a difference—ways that are not petty, demeaning to others, intrusive, or presumptuous. I'm most grateful for the outstanding investigative work found in Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* and for that of Michelle Alexander, mentioned above. These and so many other gifted authors are vividly documenting the history and present-day consequences of the systematic cruelty and oppression perpetrated against dark-skinned people. They help me empathize with my black Bahá'í brothers and sisters who, against all odds, seem to find the way to love. These books help me feel their torment and admire their strength, courage, and deep faith. For me this is the vision that “acteth as the agent and guide for true knowledge” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 35).

Likewise, I'm so grateful for this work by Jennifer Harvey. With integrity and insight, she opens our eyes to what has failed, and why, and offers

us a better way forward—a way that comports with the lofty Bahá'í ideals, as evidenced in this statement from the Bahá'í International Community, addressed to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism in 2001:

In considering the themes of the World Conference against Racism, a proper understanding of the reality of the oneness of humanity holds a number of implications.

It implies that any law, tradition or mental construct that grants superior rights or privileges to one grouping of humanity over another is not only morally wrong but fundamentally at odds with the best interests of even those who consider themselves to be in some way superior. It implies that nation-states, as the building blocks of a global civilization, must hold to common standards of rights and take active steps to purge from their laws, traditions and practices any form of discrimination based on race, nationality or ethnic origin.

It implies that justice must be the ruling principle of social organization, a corollary principle that calls for widespread measures on the part of governments, their agencies, and civil society to address economic injustice at all levels. The Bahá'í writings call for both voluntary giving and government measures, such as

the “equalization and apportionment” of excess wealth, so that the great disparities between the rich and the poor are eliminated. The Bahá'í writings also prescribe specific measures, such as profit-sharing and the equation of work with worship, that promote general economic prosperity across all classes. . .

Bahá'ís believe that their own success at building a unified community stems solely from its inspiration by the spiritual teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, who wrote extensively about the importance of unity, the reality of oneness, and the imperative need for creating a peaceful world civilization.

So, in the larger context, while seeking an antidote for racism and all the other forms of prejudice, discrimination, and dominance, we have at some point to question the legitimacy of social structures that are primarily sustained through the power-over dynamic. In his discussion of this dynamic as it applies to the equality of women with men, Bahá'í scholar Moojan Momen explains how power is a subversive value:

If there are two groups, A and B, the first of which holds power as its supreme value and the second of which does not, then Group B loses whatever it does. If it sticks to its values and refuses to compete for power with Group A, it is subjugated and A's

values are imposed upon it. If B does compete with A, then this can only be through striving for power. In this case, B also adopts power as a value and, therefore, loses its own values. Either way, A succeeds in asserting its values upon B. (38)

To eliminate racism, and for so many other reasons, we have to find ways to break out of the power-over cycle. Enter the transformative power of the Word of God, which can change the hearts of men. We can witness the efficacy of those values that unite us, which are embodied in the Bahá'í Faith—converting competition into collaboration, corruption into integrity, elitism into service, and resentment into love—so that those in power (Group A) are actually able to adopt concern for the welfare of others as their supreme value. And those in Group B can, eventually, trust and forgive. Of this Bahá'u'lláh assures us:

The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it? Is it within human power, O Hakím, to effect in the constituent elements of any of the minute and indivisible particles of matter so complete a transformation as to transmute it into purest gold? Perplexing and difficult as this may appear, the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly

power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish. The Force capable of such a transformation transcendeth the potency of the Elixir itself. The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change. (*Gleanings* 99:1)

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