

## Lecture 3: The Relationships Among Historic African Canadians and Recent Immigrants from Caribbean and Africa

I recently read a book by a sociologist named Mary C. Waters entitled *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* (Harvard University Press, 1999) which I highly recommend. Though the study is centered in the United States I think its thesis applies to West Indian immigrants in Canada as well. Her initial purpose was to study how West Indian immigrants formed a common identity when they could choose between race or ethnicity while knowing that white Americans tend to see race and ethnicity as interchangeable for all people of African descent. That is to say, whites do not recognize any difference between West Indian immigrants and black Americans until they speak. The first generation West Indian immigrant invariably has an accent. The 1.5 generation or second generation may continue to have some accent but the third generation will not have any unless they decide to cultivate one. Many do so for reasons that will become clear below.

Clearly first generation Caribbean immigrants will identify themselves either by the island from which they come or by the region Caribbean or West Indian. But, whites see them only in accordance with the racial category *black* which the West Indian is likely to reject largely because they have not been accustomed to thinking of themselves in racialized terms. Further, since they come from countries where the majority of citizens are black and are visible at all levels of civil society, their attitudes of themselves differ from those of historic blacks in America and Canada whose experience has ranged from slavery to oppressed racial minorities and only recently protected by the law as first class citizens. Further, because they are immigrants they have a different attitude towards work, the nation and their future. Also, because of their education and aspirations they have no doubts about their ability to realize a better life for themselves and their children. Even the working class immigrants are very hopeful about their future and through their various networks they are able to get low paying jobs that are sustainable. Most important, none of them want to be identified with those blacks who have been in the country for several hundred years because both the immigrants and whites share the stereotypes that the historic blacks have a different view of work, education, and of whites who have authority over them. Thus a pact emerges between white employers and West Indian workers in the work force against historic black Canadians.

Since historic blacks often cannot distinguish between whites who exercise legitimate authority over them and whites who have racist attitudes towards them, they can easily conflate the two and thus be unhappy in their jobs. West Indian immigrants do not have that problem and hence they are preferred by white employers over historic blacks because they are easier to get along with. Thus, both whites and the immigrants blame the culture of historic blacks for their lack of progress in the larger society.

Gradually, in the case of Caribbeans and Africans the status of race tends to overwhelm that of ethnicity in the eyes of whites. Many of the children of these immigrants soon begin adopting oppositional attitudes to whites as they respond to the process of racialization. Sadly, this often leads the immigrant children to view education as a “white” thing and hence something to avoid. Accordingly, some black children invariably feel guilty if their friends learn that they have made a high grade in a course. At this point the immigrant begins to see that his/her home culture is

**Keynote Lectures for The Journeys, June 24–27, 2010, by Peter J. Paris**

no match for the structures of racism that the white society nurtures and promotes through its program of racialization. In short, once the society identifies you as black your chances for social progress are diminished and that makes it more difficult for a black child to succeed than for a white child because the black child must overcome an additional hurdle that the white child does not confront. For this reason, first generation African immigrants may send their children back to the homeland for education in order to avoid this racializing process aimed at turning them into black Canadians with minimal aspiration for steady upward social and economic mobility.

Clearly, West Indians do not arrive in this country ignorant about structural racism in North America since they have heard much about it over the years. Thus, they are quite prepared to fight it vigorously when it appears in the workplace as the reason for denying promotion and the like. Unlike the historic blacks who are more likely to adapt passively to the injustice of being passed over for a promotion the West Indians are more likely to oppose it militantly.

On the other hand, this study revealed that West Indians are less prepared than historic blacks for the racism they encounter in interpersonal relationships on the job and elsewhere.

Thus, the writer of this book argues with much evidence in support of her position that a major difference exists between white immigrants to America and West Indian immigrants. Most important, the social status of white immigrants increases as they lose their immigrant status and become Americans. By contrast, the opposite is true for West Indian immigrants. Their status increases by maintaining their immigrant status because becoming American implies becoming a black American which reduces their status considerably. Accordingly, West Indians strive to retain their immigrant status the marks of which being their accent, their social networks, their initiatives in promoting their culture publicly through civic parades, independence day celebrations, music, newspaper, magazine and literary publications, social and athletic clubs, sponsoring family members to join them, and by taking their holidays in the islands. In short, immigrants from the islands might identify themselves as Jamaican American, Haitian American, West Indian or Caribbean American but not black American or African American. I assume this is similar in Canada.

Now it appears that West Indian immigrants and historic blacks need to talk with each other much more than they do if mutual understanding and respect is to occur. Historic blacks often complain that West Indian immigrants are aloof and do not wish to associate with them. They accuse them of not giving adequate attention to racism as it functions in the society. Correspondingly, West Indian immigrants believe that historic blacks give too much attention to the problem of racism and are too docile in advancing themselves. Some truth attends each of these stereotypes as well as a measure of untruth.

Now, it appears to me that the job-ceiling for blacks in most of the economy could be a bond for the two groups even as it was in the above mentioned study. Certainly both groups quickly recognize the reality of the job-ceiling for blacks regardless of their nativity. That common bond could soon become a basis for developing a common cause of supporting one another rather than being divided and going their separate ways.

All would do well to recognize that in Canada as well as the United States, many immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa have made notable contributions to the larger society that have made them important role models for all concern. We need only mention such names as Colin Powell, Marcus Garvey, Louis Farrakan, Stokeley Carmichael, Shirley Chisholm to evidence this claim. All of these have gained high social status as leaders in their respective struggles against racism: Powell and Chisholm through the process of racial integration; Garvey, Farrakan, and Carmichael through the process of racial separation.

While there are increasing numbers of immigrants coming to North America from Africa, these people have begun planting their own churches in the United States and Canada. Sometimes they are under the auspices of the host denominations while at other times they are extensions of their churches on the continent. Much more needs to be learned about the experiences of these

## Keynote Lectures for The Journeys, June 24–27, 2010, by Peter J. Paris

people. This coming fall a book will be published by one of my former students, Moses Biney, a Ghanaian Presbyterian minister and Christian ethicist who has done an ethnographical study of a Ghanaian congregation in New York City. The book is entitled *From Africa to America: Religion and Adaptation Among Ghanaian Immigrants to New York City* (New York University Press).

Now one's national or religious identity is based on a shared myth of origin: e.g., (a) the story of Abraham as the father of the Jewish people; (b) Moses as the deliverer of the Jews from slavery and leader of their spiritual trek for their own territory—the promise land; (c) the American Revolution and its founding fathers who wrote the constitution. Canada does not seem to have a founding myth and hence the nation has always been plagued by the lack of a distinctive national identity apart from a geographical region and its attempt in recent years to weave themselves into the story of the First Nation people which seems to me to be more aesthetic and decorative than a binding ethos. As indicated earlier in this lecture series, the notion of multiculturalism seems more of an administrative solution to the issue of distributing merit to a plurality of peoples than a basis for the nation's identity because the native peoples were in fact conquered by the whites who took possession of their land.

How diverse identities become one identity is a major moral and spiritual problem. Clearly, a common ancestral African descent is not a sufficient basis for an enduring identity as a people. Similarly, race is an insufficient basis for identity since it is a false reality; nor can the experience of racism or racialization be a sufficient basis for identity because it is a principle that negates rather than strengthens. One's identity may be established by the final goal of deliverance rather than the struggle either to survive the conditions of oppression or to continue the long arduous process of resistance.

Now, clearly you here in Canada are in search of your own identity, having recognized your plurality from the beginning by naming this gathering *The Journeys of Black Peoples in the United Church of Canada*. Such a name is descriptive of your wanderings and of your diversity. How Black peoples in Canada become united is still a hope which you recognized in 2007 at your gathering in Montreal under the theme "Journeying Together: Weaving a Community of Hope." This year's theme is "The Journeys of Black Peoples: All Together in One Place," based on the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. Clearly, the early Christians in the Roman Empire were thrown together by virtue of their minority status as Christians committed to a faith that was alien to that of the imperial powers. Similarly, black peoples in Canada at large and in The United Church of Canada in particular are thrown together by their minority racial status in a larger population that has long identified itself as Empire. Then and now, however, Luke's message in The Acts of the Apostles addresses all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles; oppressed and oppressors; the poor and the rich, the sick, disabled, and the imprisoned.

Blacks early discerned, however, that in the universal message of the gospel in Acts 10:34–36 that "God is no respecter of persons" and that "he hath made of one blood all the nations of men" (Acts 17:36). These verses of scripture played a major role as foundational principles for what I have called elsewhere "the black Christian tradition" based on "the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples."<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the black churches have never affirmed racism but have believed that since God is creator of all, we share the equality of being children of God.

Thus, their enduring belief in this Christian anthropology has constituted the basis for our unity as a people. This unity does not cancel out our diversity any more than the gift of the holy spirit destroyed the diversity of the people in Acts 2. They were not made the same. The event did not destroy their cultural specificities. They continued to speak different languages but they understood one another because the gift of the holy spirit enabled them to affirm, embrace and

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Paris; *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

## Keynote Lectures for The Journeys, June 24–27, 2010, by Peter J. Paris

support one another. Actions of respect, hospitality, and friendship transcend linguistic barriers and are immediately understandable by all.

Over the centuries, this devotion to Christ has been the source of their unity. Thus, diversity in unity is the message; not unity at the expense of diversity. As the richness of nature would be destroyed by the imposition of homogeneity over its diversity, so also the richness of humanity would be destroyed by a similar imposition of homogeneity.

All forms of tyranny, oppression, conquest, racialization aim at diminishing the quality of life of their prey. They aim also at destroying differences by objectifying all the captives and stripping them of their humanity. Christ enables all peoples to flourish and realize their full humanity; men, women, children, the sick, the lame, the blind, the imprisoned, widows, orphans, Jews, Gentiles, ... all peoples. This is the good news.

Hospitality to the stranger is one of the greatest moral virtues. Like immigrants of long ago, contemporary immigrants seek a better life and want only the freedom and opportunity to do so. Hospitality strengthens them in that pursuit. Hostility hinders that pursuit. It has only been in recent decades that white people in North America have been hospitable to Black peoples and that is not yet universal in these environs. In our day, Blacks in the middle class are more likely to be treated fairly than the poor and disabled. Factors of class, gender, and sexuality among blacks often make them inhospitable towards one another. They must learn that their social and economic status are subject to conditions of time and circumstance; that male privilege and the denial of equal status to women is similar in every respect of white privilege and the denial of equal status to blacks. And the same argument applies to those who are not heterosexuals. They also were made in the image of God.

Now racial minorities cannot provide leadership to the white churches until they have a strong sense of their own identity and mutual understanding and respect of their own diversity. Since they are part of the whole church, each of the parts needs to be strengthened in order to share its talents and gifts with the larger organism.

Some of the gifts of black folk to Canada are the following:

- Blacks embracing a non-racist anthropology grounded in the understanding that God is no respecter of persons and has created all people as equals
- Black churches as bearers of a unique aesthetic in spirituality, music, song, preaching (Union United Church in Montreal; First Baptist Church in Toronto)
- The African United Baptist Association of the Atlantic Provinces
- Artists like Portia White, Oscar Peterson
- Revered clergy like Rev. Dr. W.P. Oliver and his wife Pearline; Reverend Charles Este, Mary Ann Shadd, to mention only a few
- Caribbean Days in Vancouver, Carifete in Montreal, Carifest in Edmonton, Carifest in Calgary, Caribana in Toronto

Always remember that you are a caucus within The United Church of Canada. Caucuses are strategizing sessions about desired goals and the means and agency towards their realization. Under all conditions of diversity it is necessary for the diverse parts to participate in their own empowerment which necessitates adequate time and space for thought and reflection. In all such contacts diverse peoples can listen to and learn from one another. This can be facilitated by study tours, conferences, sharing one another's literature, book clubs, etc. You do a great service for The United Church of Canada and your selves by nurturing this caucus by devising communicative channels in between national gatherings, and striving to include more peoples of good will in your deliberations. Hopefully, as time goes on you will discern the need to enrich your thought and practice by initiating ecumenical discussions among your sisters and brothers in other denominations. May God continue to bless you in all your endeavors.