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# Greeting: Beyond Racial Reconciliation

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Christian worship provides one of the best resources and contexts for Christians to unlearn race and resist racism. For instance, the greeting, which Christians receive and offer to one another during worship, is a witness to the fact that Christians are drawn beyond themselves into the story of God's own life and self-sacrificing action in the world. It is by standing within this story that Christians learn to see themselves and others as gifts who, in their bodily differences, are called to be the visible Body of Christ. In the act of being greeted and of greeting one another in the name of the Trinity they bear witness to this story. Accordingly, when Christians take worship not as an occasional act but as a way of life, they acquire resources which enable them to see and relate to one another in ways far more interesting and truthful than any recommendations for racial reconciliation would ever be.

My appreciation of worship as the best context for a discussion on race has been shaped by many factors, among which are my own resistance to a newly acquired racial identity, and a determined effort to recover a vision and way of life beyond such an identity. And so, so for the reader fully to appreciate 'where I am coming from', I thought it helpful to begin with this personal story.

## On Discovering Race: A Personal Story

I did not know that I was black until the summer of summer of 1991, when I first came to the United States. That it took me so long to discover my 'race' was, however, never due to any confusion about my parentage or doubts about my skin pigmentation. It is just that in Uganda 'black' is simply an adjective, and a black person is simply one with an unusually dark complexion. And since as far as complexion goes, I am 'brown' or 'dark brown' I was never black. I was therefore surprised on coming to the United States to discover that these distinctions were not significant in the same sort of manner, and that I was simply 'black'. Moreover, what I soon discovered was that here 'black' was not an adjective that operated among other adjectives to describe a person, but an ethically and ideologically coded designation of what a person is, in this case, my very identity.

To be sure, I do not remember if there was any particular incident or decisive moment at which I became 'black'. In fact, during this first visit in the summer of 1991, I must have gotten away with a number of things that were outside the usual or 'normal' range of expectations of black and white interactions. This was particularly the case since I happened to be assigned as summer resident priest at a rural, predominantly white parish in Indiana. And since I was not aware I was 'black', I just went about discovering America and American culture in the most innocent manner. And if people were extra nice to me, this did not strike me as odd. It simply confirmed my impression of Americans as generally very friendly people. In this way, Americans reminded of the people back at home in Uganda.

I do however, remember being amazed by the fact that even after a very short time at the church I served, everybody in the town seemed to know me. Whether at a Walmart store, or at an ice cream parlor, or on an evening walk, I met people who greeted me with a friendly 'Hi Father'. I remember at first thinking to my self: everybody here must be Catholic, and so they must have seen me at mass. It is only when I asked one woman whether she came to St. Mary's and she said 'no' that I was curious how she had gotten to know me. Her quick reply: "This is a small town, and word goes around very quickly." It had never struck me that I was the only 'black' person in town.

This fact was however brought home to me one afternoon when, as I prepared to take my driver's license, I needed some practice in parallel parking. I chose a relatively quiet street in the neighborhood for this exercise, and when I was satisfied with my skills, headed back home. Just a couple of blocks away from the church, a police car pulled me over. The police officer was very polite, and when he had examined my documents and found nothing wrong explained that he had received a call from a concerned neighbor who had seen a 'black' person doing a couple of parking maneuvers in the neighborhood.

The discovery of myself as 'black' continued and even became heightened when I went to study in Belgium in the Fall of the same year. And even though I was never able fully to understand Flemish, I was aware of how frequently the word 'zwart' came up in references to, or conversations about me. Not that all these references were 'racial' in the negative sort of way. They just confirmed the extent to which race had become the dominant grid through which my life was read, and through which I was supposed to see my life. This discovery made me angry. For as far as I was concerned, 'black' or 'zwart' did not name anything about me – not even my skin color. It was just an identity that I was assumed to have; something I was supposed to be.

What I found particularly difficult to understand is the fact that all my characteristics, roles and functions did not seem to be as significant as the fact that I was 'black' or 'zwart'. I was particularly shocked that my being a Christian among fellow Christians, or my being a priest in a predominantly Catholic country like Belgium did not make any difference. I was 'black' and that greatly determined my social interactions, the church I went to, the type of housing that was open to me for rent, and even how well I did in some courses. To be sure most of this was very subtle, even though there were other incidents where racism was just in your face.

I remember for instance when Sam, another priest from Ghana who was in the same program with me, asked me to go with him to check out his new apartment. He had been shopping around for a while for an apartment, and had called a number of landowners whose ads he had seen in the paper. At detecting his African voice, the majority of them had told him that the apartment in question had just been rented out, even though the ad for the same apartment would appear in the paper the following day or week. Sam got a brilliant idea. He asked Rob, a Belgian student in our program, who agreed to call on Sam's behalf. Sure enough, the apartment was available. So, Sam invited me to go over with Rob to check out the apartment. On seeing the three of us, the landlord realized the trick. And even though Rob immediately explained that he had called for the apartment, the landlord apologized for the mistake, but the apartment was not available.

I am sure there is nothing unique about my story, except perhaps in the sense that for me this was a novel experience, a recent discovery of what it means to be 'black. But this is perhaps what made me all the more determined not to accept this new identity of myself as a racialized

person. For, I soon realized that I was beginning to hate not only myself, but others as well, for no other reason except their being 'black' or 'white'. It was then that I realized that I would either have to accept and learn to live with my new identity, or find ways to resist it. But even as I faced the challenge, the choice seemed to be clear. For, how could I allow such a recent discovery to become the overriding characteristic for my self-understanding?

It is this personal biography that perhaps best explains why I have come to see the need to move theological discussions beyond the search for guidelines and principles that foster racial reconciliation. For, helpful as many of these recommendations might be, they are based on a realism that accepts 'race' and racial identity as a fact. Accordingly, their greatest relief seems to be one of providing insights and skills (theological, ethical, political) to help us 'manage' or deal with the reality of race. However, given my story above, even as I hoped for and expected justice and racial equality, I constantly found myself longing for spaces and practices in which I could recover a sort of pre-1991 racial innocence. Accordingly, it became increasingly clear to me that more than racial reconciliation, the far more urgent ethical and theological challenge was the recovery of a vision and way of life 'beyond race'.

But if I understood this to be the challenge, I also soon discovered that the standard philosophical and theological discussions did not offer much in terms of concrete resources with which to meet the challenge. For, whereas philosophical and theological discussions could shed a light on the issue of race, their recommendations nevertheless still fell short of providing *concrete* alternatives to, or resources for a way of life beyond, race. A simple theoretical digression will help to make this clear.

## The Philosophical and Theological Discourse on Race

### The consolation of philosophy

One can learn a great deal from the philosophical discourse on race. In my case, for instance, it was my philosophy background that helped me to see the connections between the notions of 'race', 'civilization', reason, 'progress' – in a word, the connection between race and the Enlightenment project. It is this connection that led me to see the extent to which assumptions of 'race' still underpin the social, political and economic institutions of Western civilization. More specifically, philosophy helped me to see how the modern problem of race is connected to the modern accounts of the self and human flourishing. If philosophy helped me to begin to make these connections, it also helped to expose the arbitrariness of the notion of race. For, instance, I found Hannah Arendt's attempt to connect race and imperialism highly instructive especially her observation that both are grounded in practical economic interests (Arendt, 1951). Similarly, by connecting the notion of race to the 'invention' of Africa as the dark, uncivilized other of European Enlightenment, Mudimbe (1988) was able to show how race classification is just one factor reflecting the anxiety at the heart of Western claims to 'civilization'. Thus, both Arendt's and Mudimbe's argument helped me to see the deep connection between colonialism and race.

But for all these insights, philosophy was still far from providing skills and resources for a vision of life 'beyond race'. In fact, the best that philosophy seemed to offer in terms of relief were *theoretical* skills. No doubt, one could *do* a lot with these and similar intellectual insights. I remember for instance, how, armed with such insights, my African colleagues and myself often found ourselves in a spirited conversation in which we discussed, debated, and eventually

deconstructed 'blackness' as simply an invention, a political and ethical construct, meant to advance particular political and economic interests. But even with the consolation of such deconstruction we were still without any concrete skills or practices with which to live out our lives beyond 'the political and ethical construct' that we had discovered race to be. At the end of the day, we were all still 'black' and my friend Sam could still not find an apartment.

## Theology and Racial Reconciliation

The challenge of providing concrete alternatives to racism and race categories is also one that theological discussions have tended to shy away from. For, in turning to theology one is first confronted with the astonishing realization that the observation that James Cone noted in 1975 is still largely true in our day. That is, that in spite of the fact that race and racism are a major social problem, white theologians have, on the whole, had very little to say against racism (Cone, 1975, 45-53). The silence may of course be an indication of the realism with which the mainstream of Western theology has come to accept race and racism as a fact, about which nothing much can be done. It may also be, as Cone suggests, that the fact that white theologians have remained virtually mute on issues of race is because they have been unwilling to question their own cultural history, particularly the political and economic structures of Western societies. What the silence does however, is to turn the theological discourse on race into just another area of special interest, one that black theologians are expected to pursue. My being asked to contribute an essay on racism in this volume may itself not be unrelated to this observation.

Secondly, one notes that theological discussions on race have been greatly dominated by recommendations for 'racial reconciliation'. Whereas this might sound like a very concrete recommendation, one soon discovers that a great many of these theological discussions are not only abstract, they leave us at the level of principles and insights. For, even when the discussions begin by making reference to Scripture and or Christian tradition, the goal is quite often to draw from these traditions *ethical* implications or insights, which could be applied generally.

This is also perhaps the reason why within many of these discussions, the problem of race is easily reduced to a general problem of difference, one that is common to all societies. Craig Keener's 'The Gospel and Racial Reconciliation' (Keener, 1997) provides a good example. In this essay, Keener first notes that whereas differences in skin color and other physical features were noticed but rarely understood in a prejudicial manner in the New Testament, "racism in the sense of various cultures viewing themselves as superior was widespread" (118). He then examines Paul's theology of reconciliation in order to show the gospel provides insights and guidelines in how the Christian can overcome this problem of 'prejudice', and transcend "all other human barriers we have erected among ourselves" (118). I draw attention to Keener's essay because it offers a clear example of how once the problem of racism has been reduced to a universal human problem, the Christian response cannot but itself be limited to one of discovering what *insights* the gospel can shed on this general problem. To the extent that a great many theological recommendations for racial reconciliation move in this manner, they leave us at the level of insights and principles, and do not draw attention to specific Christian practices, which might offer concrete skills of resistance and an alternative to racism.

Even more problematic, however, is the fact that the attempt to reduce racism to a general problem of difference and prejudice tends to obscure the particular history and assumptions

that sustain racism as a distinctively modern problem. In the absence of any attention to that narrative, it is simply assumed that race is a natural category, and therefore, all one can hope for is tolerance or some form of racial reconciliation or harmony.

What my excursus in philosophy had allowed me to appreciate however, is the fact that race is not a natural category, but one that is somehow connected the modern accounts of the self and human flourishing. And so, by not questioning the category of race, theologies for racial may unwittingly reproduce the same accounts of the self as those responsible for giving rise to the problem of racism in the first place.

This observation is connected to a wider problem facing theology in modern times, namely, that in an attempt to remain a respectable discipline, we theologians often feel that we have to appeal to the modern accounts of culture, race and history to provide us with an account of reality. But since it is these accounts that are responsible for giving rise to the problem of race in the first place, appealing to the same accounts leaves us with little or no resources with which to move beyond the limits that the vision of these accounts impose. This is one reason why I personally find the theologies of racial reconciliation not to be radical enough. For while these discussions offer insights and ethical guidelines on how to deal with or manage the problems of racism, they leave us within the same politics and a social history where race is still a dominant story.

But if, as I have noted, the challenge is one of recovering a vision and way of life beyond race, then what is required is a different story and a different set of practices that would not have to assume 'race' or 'racial' identity. If this sounds like a utopian or idealistic expectation, it is because Christian theology and ethics should be by their nature idealistic in the sense that they reflect God who constantly calls the Church to new imaginations of the real, of what is possible. Moreover, my own idealism was also made possible by my personal biography. For, while I knew race and racism to be a fact in the West, I also knew as a matter of fact that it is possible not to be 'black' or 'white'. In fact, what my personal story had led me to see is the fact that being 'black' or 'white,' or for that matter any other racial identity, was an acquired identity, which is to say, a *learned* vision of life and set of corresponding habits. This, I think is what Cornel West has in mind when he notes that blackness has no meaning outside a system of race-conscious people and practices (West, 1993, 39).

This is what makes a Christian response to race not so much a matter of principles and insights but one of *practices*. In other words, if racial identity is a matter of community, an alternative identity is not only possible, it is a matter of an alternative community, embodying different practices and a different vision of the self. If racism is at home within modern Western societies, then the Christian challenge to racism was really one of being able to step outside the vision of modern Western society, and find oneself part of a community and practices in which race and racial identity simply makes no sense. Christian worship provides precisely such an opportunity in the sense that within the practice of Christian worship a new unique community is being constituted in a manner that both challenges and offers a concrete alternative to the story of race and racism.

### Christian Worship as a 'Wild Space'

Such a claim needs to be qualified in at least two ways. First, we all are sadly aware that worship can be and has so often been one of the most segregated spaces. And so, far from

offering an alternative to the cultural patterns of racism, Christian worship has often simply confirmed and even re-enforced the racialized boundaries and interaction within modern society. That is why an appreciation of worship like we are calling for involves a re-assessment of the relation of worship to modern culture. While worship has tended to provide an opportunity for a spiritual confirmation and affirmation of the dominant cultural patterns and values, I suggest that we see worship as site for imagining and embodying concrete alternatives to the dominant cultural patterns and values. In this way, Christian worship is able to provide Christians with the resources and possibilities for living out of, and living out concretely alternatives to, the vision of modern society.

Secondly, the notion of 'stepping outside' might strike many as encouraging a form of Christian sectarianism. Even without getting into the so often misleading assumptions connected to this impression (Katongole, 2002, 189-203), there is nothing about Christian worship that forces Christians to withdraw from engagement in their societies. What is meant instead is that through a practice like worship, Christians are able to develop the skills and practices required so engage critically with their societies, or which is the same thing, to live as 'Resident Aliens' (Hauerwas, 1998) within the societies they find themselves in.

More recently, I have found McFague's notion of 'wild spaces' (McFague, 2001) a helpful way to characterize the practice of Christian worship. In an attempt to recover ethical existence in the face of a consumer-oriented economy and culture, McFague suggests the cultivation of 'wild spaces' as a normative requirement if the individual is to resist, survive, or creatively reshape the draft of an all too powerful consumerist world-view. A wild space, according to McFague, is whatever does not fit the stereotypical human being, or the definition of the good life as defined by conventional culture. What is particularly significant however is that for McFague, a wild space is not the province of a self-sufficient way of life 'outside' Western capitalist and consumer society. Rather, wild spaces are created or discovered in the rifts of that very culture.

Imagine conventional Western culture as a circle with your world overlaid over it. If you are [a] poor Hispanic lesbian, your world will not fit into the conventional Western one. It will overlap somewhat (you may be educated and able-bodied), but there will be a large crescent that will be outside. That is your wild space; it is the space that will allow – and encourage – you to think differently, to imagine alternative ways of living. It will not only give you problems, but possibilities. (McFague, 2001, 48).

Christian worship is precisely such a wild space, which allows – and encourages – [Christians] to think differently, to imagine and embody alternative ways of living. Worship enables Christians to break out of the status quo of conventional culture, but also offers resistance to it in ways that a new change in rules does not. For it is by standing within the wild space that worship is that Christians can now *see* themselves in a different perspective. Such seeing of course is not theoretical, but is, in fact, made possible to the extent that the Christian is located within concrete practices, which reflect a different story of the self than that named by race.

And so, in the remaining part of this essay, I would like to draw attention to just one such practice of Christian worship, namely the act of greeting, in order to highlight the conclusion that the greeting which Christians receive and offer to one another during worship provides resources for Christians to *unlearn* race, and come to embody a new pattern of life

## On Being Greeted in the Name of the Trinity

When Christians gather for worship, they are greeted and in turn take time to greet one another. The Catholic liturgy of the mass for instance, begins with priest greeting the congregation in these or similar words. "May the Grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God the Father, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you..."

Even though I have been quite familiar with this formula, I first began to fully appreciate its full theological significance on a 1997 visit to Malaysia, when on one afternoon, I was invited to participate in the celebration of mass at a Kampung (village) community outside Kuching. Mass began outside the church, with the priest greeting the congregation, and everyone in the congregation greeting everyone else. What I found particularly striking was not only the orderliness of the whole exercise, but the fact that we had to extend greeting not only to those next to us but to each person in the congregation. For what happened was that the greeting was part of the procession into the church whereby the congregation formed two lines, with the person at the end of each line passing through the formed lines and greeting everybody in the line. Even though it was quite a while before the last person got into the church, by that time we all had had a chance to touch, kiss, shake the hands and look into the eyes of everyone else in the congregation.

I draw attention to this example not only because I do not know any other congregation that takes the practice of liturgical greeting as seriously, but also for the fact that this Kampung community is one the most racially and ethnically diverse communities I have experienced. A simple survey confirmed that the congregation comprised Christians of Chinese, Malay, Indian as well as a host of *Orang Asli* (indigenous or tribal) backgrounds. Thus, the more I have had a chance to reflect on this experience, the more I have realized its profound theological relevance, and the rich resource which greeting provides for Christian ethics in the context of race.

## Beyond Modern Anthropology

Ordinarily, greeting can be a good way to help people drop their guard and feel at home. Within the context of Christian worship, greeting does accomplish a similar goal. This was certainly the case at the mass at the Kampung. On a deeper level however, what the greeting does is to help Christians drop the guard of their modern self. This is so important if we are to begin to imagine ourselves and others beyond racial categories. For I suspect that one of the reasons why racism is such an intractable problem for us is that it reflects the story of the modern self, particularly the constant anxiety at the heart of the modern project. The anxiety has somehow to do with our desire to become both autonomous and our own self-makers. For, having repudiated any story beyond its own choosing, the modern self must now seek to justify not only its own existence, but also the certainty of its knowledge, as well as the worthiness of its undertakings and values. However, with self-interest as the one and perhaps only story to live for, self-justification becomes both tenacious and ever suspect.

This anxiety cannot but give rise to distinctive politics of power as control, and an economics of exploitation of those different from us in the name of 'self-interest' and 'self-preservation'. In fact, as McGrane (1989) puts it, it is this constant anxiety that gives rise to practices in which the meeting with the other is policed by theories of race, history or culture – all of which are meant to assure the modern self's place at the center of history, as the climax of civilization, or

as the 'most advanced'. It is perhaps not surprising that the result of this self-arming has been a history of colonialism, imperialism and slavery. What this history reflects however is nothing but the endless thrust of the desire for control and conquest of the modern self, a self haunted by the need to justify its own existence and place in history. Racism is just one aspect of this story.

That is also why, unless this story of the modern self is questioned, ethical recommendations for racial reconciliation may unwittingly reproduce the same politics of anxiety. That is what makes an ethics of 'tolerance' problematic. For it reproduces a problematic form of inclusion by which power and privilege are extended but not questioned. In this way, white privilege may be extended to black folks without however, questioning the underlying politics and accounts of the self and of human flourishing that are responsible for giving rise to the problem of racism in the first place. What is required if such a politics is to be resisted is an altogether different story of the self, a different politics in which the self is 'relieved', so to speak, of the need to provide the grounds for its own existence or to prove its importance. The relief can only come to the extent that the self is not at the center of life. Christian worship is precisely the performance of this different story, which draws the self into the wider story of God's creation and redemption.

In other words, if modern anthropology, in which theories and the practices of racism are at home, is an 'arming' strategy, Christian worship is a 'disarming' practice. That is what being greeted, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..." does. For the greeting is an invitation for the Christian to 'relax', as it were, in the knowledge that his or her life need no other grounds for its justification since it is already been justified and the Christian is already part of that new creation that is made possible by 'the love of God, the grace of Son and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'. Becoming thus aware of, and learning to relax in, this good news, Christians can now be aware of other Christians – not as strangers competing for limited resources, but as fellow pilgrims, fellow citizens of this new creation.

### The performance of a Christian anthropology

The greeting at the start of worship places the Christian at the very heart of a Christian anthropology, or, which is the same thing, the very heart of ecclesiology. For what the greeting announces is the fact that the Christian is part of a peculiar gathering, one that is based not in the self-interested accumulation of economic or political gains, but a gathering or assembly (ecclesia) of reconciled sinners, performed by the self-sacrificing love and forgiveness of God.

To put it differently, the story is not one of Christians gathering, but of *being* gathered, *being* assembled, of *being* greeted. The greeting at the start of worship announces the wonderful news that the Christian is the recipient and not the provider of this new dispensation. That Christians are greeted just goes to confirm that they are not the ones who initiate this story of grace, love and forgiveness. In fact, the story is not about them. Rather, it is the story of what God has done and continues to do on their behalf. Not just them, but God's whole creation. In other words, this is a story whose existence and truth precedes us. That is why the greeting is at the same time a reminder of the story of "in the beginning" – a beginning that reflects God's superabundance and goodness. For this is what the very name of Trinity names – the superabundance of love, fellowship and communication as it exists within the three persons of the Trinity. It is into this superabundance of creation and fellowship that the Christian is invited and drawn by the act of being greeted 'in the name of the Father...'

Thus the greeting pronounces us as the gifts that we are. And having received the good news of our being gifts, we can learn to see others similarly as gifts. Thus having been greeted in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit... Christians can now greet one another in the same name. In this way, the greeting becomes a benediction, which is offered to the congregation, and which they, in turn, offer to one another. But it also becomes an invitation to mimic or model the same story of differences as embodied by God the Trinity. This does not mean that we can now dismiss as irrelevant all differences, but rather it is an invitation to learn to name our differences and particularities in the name of the Trinity. The act of greeting, whether it is by kissing or shaking the hands of the one next to us, is the way in which Christians make this conviction concrete.

Once the issue has been put in this manner then one realizes that within the act of greeting the range of Christian theology from creation to eschatology is being played out. In other words, being greeted and taking the time to greet one another in the name of God, the Christian is standing in between creation and eschatology; witnessing to the peaceful abundance and differences within God's creation, while at the same time anticipating the final display of the fullness of God's love, fellowship and grace in the whole of creation at the end of time, when Christ will be all in all. In the meantime, Christians become part of this new creation, this new gathering or assembly; a new community of worship, not just one that performs this act of worship, but one for whom worship has become a way, *the way of life*.

## A Christian Ethics

Greeting thus becomes a mode of being in the world in between times; it does not have ethical 'implications', it *is* Christian ethics. And as ethics it announces and opens up a revolutionary future in which, as McCabe says (1969: 75), 'we do not merely see something new, but we have a new way of seeing' God, the world, ourselves in it, and others. Similarly, as Christian ethics, worship does not simply encourage or facilitate racial reconciliation. Rather, it institutes a whole new social reality in which being 'black' or 'white' just makes no sense. That is why worship itself is the revolutionary future, a 'wild space' in which a different story, a different performance is being played out and rendered visible in the world.

That is why it is significant that the greeting comes at the start of worship. In fact, one reason why I found the practice at the Malaysian Kampung so remarkable, was that the greeting was the way, the only way that anyone could get into the church, thus to listening to the word of God and sharing the Eucharist. This in itself is highly significant since it confirms that greeting is the concrete embodiment of a key Christian claim namely, that we cannot know God; we cannot even hear his word rightly let alone share his table, unless we have learnt to greet each other, including the stranger, with the sign of peace. In fact, within the context of such greeting each other in the name of the Father...' the very concept of 'stranger' is being challenged and redefined from a radically Christian perspective.

Significant as it is, the rite of Christian greeting cannot be isolated from the full context of Christian worship and presented as an 'ethic' for racial reconciliation. In fact, the fact that greeting is located at the beginning of worship simply goes to show how it is this concrete practice that initiates us, draws us into the full politics and economics of what it means to be a worshipping community. Anyone able to stand the greeting should be willing and ready to go all the way. In the particular case of the Malaysian Kampung, this was perhaps the reason the worship did not end with the usual 'dismissal', but with an invitation to 'fellowship'. What I

particularly found remarkable about the fellowship, apart from the fact that everybody stayed around, was the fact that all the cans of coca-cola that different people had brought in were broken open and poured into one jug. It was from this one jug that the coca-cola was served using only one cup, which was passed on from one person to the next. As I thought about this practice, I found myself thinking how it would have been much easier, more time-efficient, and even more 'hygienic' to hand each person a can of coke (or invite one to pick one) since there were more than enough to go around. Only gradually was I able to see in this 'awkward' practice, a form of resistance to the individualism inherent in a market economy that, for instance, neatly packages coca-cola in cans and bottles that are so convenient for 'individual' consumption.

This is what is meant by the claim that greeting is both an invitation, and a concrete embodiment of what it means, to go all the way. For through the act of greeting the otherwise racially and ethnically diverse Kampung community found ways of moving beyond the dominant cultural identifications of being Malay, Indian, Chinese, Dayan or Kadazan. At the same time, worship constituted a visible wild space, which allowed and encouraged resistance to other dominant stories including resistance to the individualism of capitalistic consumption, even as they were already standing within the story of modern economics- thus drinking coca-cola.

But that the entire gamut of Christian theology and ethics should be embodied within such a gesture as greeting just confirms how God is not abstract, but concrete as the handshakes, voices, hugs and kisses of a people who greet each other "in the name of the Father..." And so, abstracted from such concrete practices 'God' remains just an idea, a hypothesis, to be believed or contested.

#### Beyond Docetism: On 'Touching Color'

We can highlight the point above by noting how Christian worship, the act of greeting in particular, provides Christians with an opportunity to be present to one another in ways that challenge the docetism that may very easily be masked by theologies of 'racial reconciliation'. Early Christian docetism was an attempt to downplay the significance of Jesus' bodily incarnation. Because the docetists felt that attributing fully bodily incarnation to Christ would limit the claims to Jesus' divinity and attributes, they taught that Jesus' bodily incarnation was just an appearance, which Christ had to assume in order to affect for us his saving operations.

Jennings is right to note that there is an unrelenting docetism that haunts the way Christians in the West deal with race, culture and the problem of racism (Jennings, 1997). For even though racism is in great part, an imagination involving bodies, the danger now is to claim an easy and quick 'racial harmony' – one however that avoids the need to confront, touch, feel and relate to bodies that are different from us. Thus, the temptation, as Jennings reminds us, is to claim: 'I do not see anyone as black or white, just my sister or brother in Christ. There is no such thing as race. We are all one in Christ.' Or we say, 'we just need to learn how to forgive, respect and live together and go on to the future.' Or we say, 'where I was raised there were no black people. Therefore, race was and is not an issue for me.' (47)

Such claims, however, are so often a reflection of our desire to see racial harmony without facing the need for the transformation of our usual forms of social existence and community. Moreover, the claim to color blindness may be, as Mary McClintock Fulkerson suggests (2001, 140), just another strategy of condensation associated with liberal claims to tolerance whereby

the one who is 'tolerant' can still position the other in his or her sphere of influence. In this way, claims to color blindness are just a way to avoid face-to-face bodied relation in situations of reciprocity. Without such bodied interaction however, Christians cannot fully appreciate what it means to be the Body of Christ. That is why the practice of greeting within Christian worship is a good place to begin if we are to recover the significance of the body for Christian salvation.

This is another reason why I found the practice at the Kampung very significant, in that the greeting was so much about the body. It involved movement, touch, hugs, kisses and handshakes. There was therefore just no way one could avoid touching and relating to other bodies. In so doing, however, a key conviction of Christian life was being played out – namely that the body matters for Christian salvation since as Christians we believe that we are saved in and through the body, our own bodies, but ultimately the Body of Christ. Such concrete bodily interaction is therefore a good way to learn what it means to be that very Body of Christ – the one Body of Christ which is made up of different members (bodies). And so in the very act of Christian greeting, in kissing or touching other bodies, including those who look very different from one's own, one is being introduced to the very mystery of the Body of Christ.

Which means, that in our modern time-conscious world, where greeting is often nothing more than a disinterested 'hi', the challenge is at the same time one of recovering an embodied account and practice of greeting like the one at the Malaysian Kampung. What is, however, even more important is the need to recover Christian discipleship as a practical way of life at the margins of the dominant cultures of our day. For, I suspect that the fact that the Christian community in Malaysia had learnt to take worship so seriously has to do with the unique situation of their being a minority in a predominantly Muslim country. For finding themselves in a marginal (8% of the population) and often marginalized position, Christians in Malaysia may have no choice but to turn to their tradition and practices for resources with which to lead meaningful lives at the margins of the dominant culture.

That is why the specific challenge facing Christians in the West, as well as in other cultures where Christianity is the dominant religion, has to do with the recovery of worship as a 'wild space' that can foster an alternative imagination to the one of the dominant culture. This challenge is particularly urgent in the West given the fact, as already noted, that here worship tends to reflect and reinforce the same neat racialized interaction of the dominant culture. In this respect, Martin Luther King Jr's comment that 11 o'clock is the most segregated hour in America is not only a true sociological observation, it is a deeply disturbing theological assessment of a Church that has long given up on the challenge to embody an alternative imagination. What makes King Jr's observation is more disturbing is the realization that it is true not just of the Church in the West. For whereas the case of racism that we have been examining makes this to be obvious in relation to America, Martin Luther King Jr's observation reflects a more global phenomenon of a Christianity that has become comfortable – too much at home – within the dominant cultures of our time.

In Africa, for instance, similar versions of a cultural Christianity are so easily reproduced through an uncritical quest for inculturation. The effect is that here too, instead of providing an opportunity for re-imagining African identities and societies from a Christian perspective, Christian worship tends to reflect and reproduce the same ethnic or tribal divisions within African society. This is also what leads us to suspect any attempts to encourage racially or ethnically homogenous congregations, where such homogeneous congregations even when their existence is justified in terms of a need or appreciation of cultural diversity or

authenticity. For if what we have said about worship and greeting is true, there seems to be no greater challenge relating to our invitation to be the Body of Christ than to resist these new forms of segregation, which might easily ride on a postmodern celebration of culture. Such fascination with 'difference' and 'culture' might just be another way to assume a kind of superficial 'racial diversity', one however that avoids the need to resist the dominant forms of our social and cultural existence.

## Conclusion

Here, by way of conclusion, I can only recount my own experience of the transformation that worship makes possible, which brings me to where I began my story. For, during the years I lived in Europe, I was lucky to belong to the St. Mary and St. Martha English Speaking Parish of the university. It was through worship with and in this multi-cultural, multi-racial congregation that I not only got a chance to meet people from all parts of the world, but also to recover somewhat the sort of pre-1991 racial innocence for which I so much longed. Through our weekly worship and the concrete greeting and interaction this provided, I was able to become part of a community for whom being black or white had ceased to be an interesting identity. This did not only allow a certain relaxation and lack of pretentiousness in our worship, it opened up possibilities for friendship based on what we discovered to be more interesting stories of our lives.

This was the very same 'relief' that helped me to survive the summer of 1991, when I first discovered that I was black. For even as I discovered my race, I was lucky to be part of the community of St. Mary's Parish. The opportunity to worship in and together with the 'white' congregation of St. Mary's again proved to be one of the transforming spaces for both myself and my 'white' congregation. I remember for instance an elderly man who tearfully later confessed to me that I was the first black person whose hand he had shaken. Another man whispered to me at the end of mass how he had at first been reluctant to receive communion from the hands of a black person. The most telling case however, was that of Dorothy, a woman in her late 80s whom I had seen regularly and greeted at Saturday five o'clock mass. When I learnt that she had been taken to a nursing home, I went down to visit her. She was very happy to see me, and excitedly called on her roommate: "Come and say hello to Fr. Emmanuel, she said. "Fr. Emmanuel is not a Negro. He is a priest!"

If through the greeting we receive and offer within Christian worship we can, like Dorothy, begin to see each other not as strangers in competition for limited resources, but as gifts of a gracious God. For then we would already have discovered ourselves within a new imagination; on the road to a new and revolutionary future, which worship both signals and embodies. Part of this new future consists in discovering that there are more determinative, and far more interesting stories that we can tell about ourselves and about others than just being 'white' or 'black'.

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