

THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIALIZED DISCOURSE IN MORMONISM

By Darron Smith

JUNE 2003 WILL MARK THE TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY of the announcement by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that all worthy male members, regardless of race, are eligible for priesthood ordination. The 1978 declaration created a moment of great hope and optimism within the Church, and many assumed this revelation would usher in a new era of success in proselytizing among African Americans. However, the promise of a quarter-century ago has only partially been realized. This is because the Church has not done enough to remake its racist past and present in such a way as to coincide with its mission to teach, preach, fellowship, and retain African Americans.

Projects designed to fully embrace African American saints will meet with difficulties, I believe, until each of us recognize just how persistent and pervasive racism in U.S. society is. It is present in virtually every facet of life, including the workings of religious organizations. So, even though the priesthood ban was repealed in 1978, the discourse that constructs what blackness means is still very much intact today. Under the direction of President Spencer W. Kimball, the First Presidency and the Twelve removed the policy that denied blacks the priesthood but did very little to disrupt the multiple discourses that had fostered the policy in the first place. Hence there are Church members today who continue to summon and teach at every level of Church education the racial discourse that blacks are descendants of Cain, that they merited lesser earthly privilege because they were “fence-sitters” in the War in Heaven, and that, science and climatic factors aside, there is a link between skin color and righteousness. A complete disruption of these discourses will require a rearticulation of Church history and an understanding of how that past interrelates with secular racial history. Further, a greater number of black voices will need to be heard in leadership and scholarly settings, where, with sensitivity and without the

threat of censorship or sanction, they can communicate ways the now-defunct ban continues even today to create for African Americans a position of “less-than” in Church spaces.

RACISM is articulated in multiple and complex ways. The popular perception of racism is that, either by word or deed, racists commit acts of aggression against someone of another race. The problem with this definition is that it assumes only individuals are implicated in racist practices whereas institutions are not—or, if they are, it is usually in isolated incidents. This notion that racism is a function of the individual keeps us from understanding the larger reality of racism as discourse in which social actors perform racial scripts in numerous ways.

For instance, many of us are familiar with slavery, sharecropping, Jim Crowism, and segregation. These are historical events that, thankfully, have been repudiated in the present-day United States, yet the racial perceptions about the “other” that underwrote each of these practices have yet to disappear. So instead of overt racism, most of today’s racial discourse operates in the way individuals, groups, and organizations interact with each other. In other words, how we see ourselves is, to a greater or lesser extent, through the prism of race. Race is not limited only to bodies and skin color, but extends to ideas, values, and beliefs that are held as “normative.” The primary locus of racism at this level is found in the privileging of one group over another. Typically in the United States, whiteness emerges as the preferred prism through which people come to appreciate history, art, literature, and popular culture and which underwrites much that takes place in the justice system, as well as in business, education, housing, and health care.

In my graduate work in cultural studies, I have found the dichotomy of blackness/whiteness to be helpful in unveiling how racialized discourse influences notions of power and privilege. Blackness and whiteness can be thought of as classifications that have been historically determined through social relations based on oppression, repression, and, to some extent, “progress.” So the construction of blackness as “other” in the Church was not an anomaly, especially given the overlapping secular racist discourses that were endemic in U.S. society—the way in which blackness was named by whiteness. For example, just as today whiteness constructs the idea of black



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urban spaces as dangerous, sexual, and drug-infested, whiteness in the Church also defined blackness as cursed. Until very recently, black people have not been able to name themselves (which may explain the seeming fixation of the black community to continually represent itself). Since their earliest contact with black Africans, Europeans have represented blackness in a number of ways ranging from criminality and fear to myths about hypersexuality and about exceptional abilities in music and athletics.

The seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries produced many ideas about the black body through a regime of pseudoscientific truth.¹ During the eighteenth century, for example, black slaves in North America were construed as three-fifths a person—chattel property without souls. Such a notion about blackness provided a basis for many whites to justify the inhumane treatment of black slaves. The power of language also enabled academic disciplines to embrace assumptions about black peoples' so-called inferior values, mores, and behaviors. And whiteness, as the fortunate opposite of blackness and its negative attributes, became firmly established as “normative.”²

Not surprisingly, early LDS leaders were influenced by many of those ideas about blackness. Pseudo-scientific literature regarding the inherent status of blacks was abundantly available and even found its way into Church publications such as the *Millennial Star*, *Times and Seasons*, and *Juvenile Instructor*.³ But, unfortunately, some leaders went further in portraying blackness in explicitly negative terms by adding a theological layer that implied these inferior characteristics and status were God-granted or, at least, God-approved. The key element in this theological mix was the adoption of the idea (prevalent during the time it was appropriated) that God “marked” Cain with blackness and “cursed” him so that he would forever be persecuted. Early leaders extended this to mean Cain and his descendants would never hold the priesthood and taught that this mark and curse continued even after the flood through Canaan, Ham's son through his wife Egyptus, whose descendants were believed to be the negroid races.⁴ Further anchoring the early LDS appropriation of negative notions concerning blackness are several Book of Mormon teachings that associate dark skin with that which is vile, filthy, and evil, and white skin with that which is delightful, pure, and good. A metaphorical reading of darkness as representing that which is loathsome is harmful enough, but many leaders taught that this as a literal fact, that God could and sometimes would darken the skin of those who fell out of his favor, and vice versa.⁵

Although blacks are not usually imagined to be among those who are the descendants of the Book of Mormon Lamanites, it is instructive to look briefly at some of the discourse in just this past half-century concerning this literal interpretation of the skin-color/God's-favor link. In our lifetime, it has not been uncommon to hear Church members speak about “rescuing” the Lamanite (meaning Native American) population from its own spiritual demise. Numerous scriptural

references in the Book of Mormon articulate that the Gentile/white population is supposed to take the gospel to the Lamanite people (Morm.5:15; 7:8), and many members take as literal the Book of Mormon passages that hint that the skin of Lamanites will whiten as they accept the gospel (Jacob 3:8; 3 Ne. 2:15). Spencer W. Kimball, the Church president who received the revelation that repealed the ban on black men holding the priesthood, manifested great concern for Native Americans during his long tenure as an apostle. Speaking in the October 1960 General Conference, he made a statement that was seen as powerful advocacy for this dispossessed minority but which also illustrates how language can powerfully inscribe color consciousness:

I saw a striking contrast in the progress of the Indian people today. . . . For years they have been growing delightful, and they are now becoming white and delightful as they were promised. . . . The children in the home placement program in Utah are often lighter than their brothers and sisters in the hogans on the reservation.⁶

I did not find out about the priesthood ban on blacks until after I had joined the Church, and I passed on much of the folklore while serving a mission in Michigan. Looking back on that experience, I venture to say that had I known about such teachings in the Church, I might not have joined.

ONCE IDEAS, EVEN erroneous ones, become internalized to where they work as the lenses through which we unconsciously view the world, it takes a great deal of effort to make them conscious again. And, to some degree, black people in the Church agree or accept—at least partially—the traditional discourse on black spiritual demise; otherwise they would not join. I did not find out about the priesthood ban on blacks until after I had joined the Church, and, sadly, I passed on much of the folklore while serving an LDS mission in Michigan. Looking back on that experience, I venture to say that had I known about such teachings in the Church, I might not have joined. I remain a member currently because of my faith in the Church's basic doctrines and my hope that a more thorough change will occur to undo the traditional racial discourse on blacks still

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being perpetuated in many corners of the Church. It is not enough to change a social practice, policy, or mandate without pushing through the arduous task of rearticulating the discourse that helped to create it.

Many Church members suppose that their leaders are inspired on virtually all matters, including race. But it is impossible for white people, even prophets, to really know blackness unless they develop relationships with blacks that move beyond mere acquaintance, peer, co-worker, or fellow ward member. Without many meaningful intimate relationships with the racialized “other,” how can we move beyond the profound distortions brought on by the long-standing discourse and the warp of privilege? Even some of the LDS intellectuals who hail discourse on race and speak on those issues summon many of their notions from white sources and cultural spaces. Many seem to me to be cultural tourists, yet they are often called upon to give their “expert” analysis of blackness, just as most official discourse in the Church about the roles and divine nature of women is articulated by men. There is not nearly enough speaking from black spaces that can offer a different interpretation of reality.

Blackness as a discourse that embodies social practice must be reconfigured to provide a different construction of knowledge and truth. Blacks and whites must find new ways of creating mutual cooperation and unity in the Church, and blacks must be given more freedom to speak from the full range of their experience, not just from those experiences that fit comfortably within the predominant discourse. Otherwise, that discourse will never change. Blacks who do move toward Mormonism should not be made to feel that blackness is synonymous with curses, marks, or indifference. And this can be accomplished only by a formal repudiation, in no uncertain terms, of all teachings about Cain, the pre-mortal unworthiness of spirits born to black bodies, and any idea that skin color is connected to righteousness. ☞

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, “On the Different Races of Man.” Found in *This is Race: An Anthology Selected from the International Literature on the Races of Man* (New York: Schuman, 1950); David Hume, *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1988); John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 1–6.

2. Some scholars have applied the term “regime of truth” to this type of discourse. For example, much work in anthropology, sociology, medicine, and law has created a way of talking about race that has inhibited access by many people of color to certain economic, housing, medical, and educational resources. For instance, even as legal scholars discuss the need for the law to be “colorblind,” they are actually acknowledging how “color conscious” it really is. And in popular culture, blacks have been represented as inclined toward criminal behavior, which, in turn, has had wide-reaching effects on criminal conviction rates. Biologists argue that skin, bone, and hair are linked to all sorts of genetic characteristics, and such ideas have often been used to try to fix and secure human difference. The fallout from such constructions is that many members of racial groups “stay” within their own spaces because of the way law, anthropology, sociology, biology, and religion have constructed and legitimized these differences. Thus “regime of truth” speaks to the fact that the concept of race is far more a social construction than a biological one, and that the term “race” is less a description than an instrument of power.

3. See *Latter-day Saint Millennial Star* 15 (1853):422, 20 (1858):278; *Times & Seasons* 4:375–76, 5:395, 6:857; *Juvenile Instructor* 3 (1868):142.

4. Interestingly, the Ku Klux Klan is one of the few “religious” groups who still teach that blacks descended from Ham. And although not actively perpetuating the doctrine through official channels, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, unlike many world traditions, has not sufficiently distanced itself from this folklore nor the extension by certain LDS leaders that blacks descend not only from Ham but from Cain as well.

5. The primary scriptural basis for this teaching is 2 Ne. 5:21.

6. Spencer W. Kimball, *Conference Reports* (Oct. 1960): 32–34.



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PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

When the three of you are here
offering your swift gifts—
the complicated story
of the wooden plane
you are building at school,
the careful quiet you have learned
to get my dog to come to you,
the half-chewed piece of salmon
you retrieve from your mouth
to lay in my open palm—
I cannot imagine what it will be like
after your parents take you home.
How quickly that little biplane
with the mute pilot,
her tiny cargo of silence,
will set down outside my door.
But for the moment,
she's idling behind the trees
on a grass runway
three thousand miles from here.

—PRISCILLA ATKINS