GENESIS, CHURCH AND COLOUR

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EVENTS at Nottingham and Notting Hill may well be symptoms of a more deep-seated and widespread evil in our midst. It is true that bullying Teddy-boys have been suitably punished, but it is also true, at the time of writing, that our popular press has printed letters which betray considerable race-feeling and racial prejudice. And anyway there is apparently conclusive evidence[1] that the population of Britain falls into three broad groups of roughly equal size: one third is tolerant of coloured people, one third is mildly prejudiced, and one third is very prejudiced. These are saddening figures; and, alas, all the ugly incidents and ugly attitudes at Nottingham and Notting Hill do but confirm the accuracy of the estimate.

This is what obtains in twentieth-century Britain. In striking contrast, antiquity did not know of racial prejudice. The true Greek saw the world as something divided between Hellenes and Barbarians; another division would give the categories of citizen and slave. You were born, or became, a Roman citizen, without the slightest reference or advertence to skin pigmentation. Jews in the time of St Paul, whatever their exclusiveness and strong feeelings about 'gentiles' or uncircumcised non-Jews, were quite unconscious of colour differences. We read in the Acts of the Apostles of an Ethiopian, a minister of Queen Candace of Ethiopia, who had gone to Jerusalem to worship (Acts viii, 27). He was no doubt a devout proselyte, and accepted like all others . . . 'from every nation under heaven, Parthian, Medes, Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judaea, Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia . . .' (Acts ii, 8-10).

The few who have looked into the history of racial prejudice agree that it came into being in the sixteenth century, and even then only very gradually. Pope Paul III in 1537 published a series of Bulls which are probably the first authoritative pronouncement of the Church on race questions. The Bulls were in response to abuses which had been brought to his notice by a Dominican bishop in the West Indies. The Pope on this occasion

1 A. H. Richmond, *The Colour Problem*, p. 240.

declared that West Indians 'should not be treated like animals . . . but regarded as true men, capable of adopting the Christian faith . . . and indeed desiring it . . .'.

Race feeling and race prejudice are thus a comparatively modern phenomenon. Of set purpose we say 'feeling' and 'prejudice', and we imply certain blind impulses and irrationalities. They come of warping and sub-rational reactions which are in-bred and acquired. But we do not say inborn. No man is conceived and comes into this world with race-feeling; and little children, white and coloured, can play together and grow up together utterly happily. The prejudice or feeling is something sinister bred into young minds by older folk already tainted; and it can grow immensely strong. All who have reflected on such things can recall incidents which betray intense race-feeling—even among their friends. Feeling and emotion invade our very vocabulary. Take the expression 'racial segregation'. 'Segregation' by itself is quite neutral in tone: we segregate, and we must, all who have smallpox. But 'racial segregation' is not at all a neutral term, and for some indeed the words are charged with emotional content. Or take the word 'native'. This word is now banned from missionary documents of the Church, because seemingly the world at large can only use the word in a pejorative sense, with some tint of emotion.

However, this is enough on prejudices and irrationalities. Let us venture into another climate of thought, and strive, in the serenity of faith and quiet reasoning, to grasp what the Book of Genesis and Catholic principles have to teach in these matters.

'He made from one common origin every race of men to dwell upon the whole face of earth'[2] (Acts xvii, 26), says St Paul in his speech to the Athenian sophists or intellectuals: but they did not question or hesitate over this point. They let St Paul speak on till he touched on Resurrection or 'Anastasis' (could it be a goddess?). That all men should have a common origin, should be descended of one, caused no surprise, no difficulty at all. Presumably it was an everyday assumption, accepted by them all, and naturally known without the intervention of Revelation. But St Paul's teaching here was not born of a Greek philosophical system or

2 Spencer translation. The R.S.V. leaves the ambivalence of the Greek, 'He made from one every nation of men'.

tradition. His mind on this, as on much else, was formed by constant reading and reflection on Genesis, especially Genesis i and ii. The Jewish tradition about Genesis lived on and took a new life and a new look with the coming of Christ and the Church. Thus the Catholic theologian of today will seek and find his basic data, for the particular problem of human races, in Genesis i-xi.

We need, to start with, to know the general character of this part of Genesis; the unique literary mode, the Mesopotamian and Haran backgrounds, the eternal truth of God enshrined in age-old popular narratives. Genesis ii inculcates, among other truths, (*a*) the special creation of man, (*b*) one human nature capable of God's favours, (*c*) man is made 'in the image' of God, (*d*) monogenism or the doctrine which holds to the descent of all human beings from a first pair.[3] An important verse is Genesis ii, 7: 'Yahweh God then modelled man of the clay of earth. He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being'. 'Man' here, *âdâm* (coming from *adâmâh*, the soil, cf. Genesis iii, 19 and 23) starts by being a general term,[4] 'human being', 'man', '*der Mensch*'. Later, in Genesis iv, 25 and v, 1 and 3, it comes to be the proper name of the first human being. The first creation narrative tells of the creation of the first 'man' in the same general way, and adds the precision, 'male and female he created them' (Genesis i, 26). The whole human race is derived from a first man, a first pair who share in the same human nature. Such is the clear teaching of Genesis, as interpreted by the Church, which in turn follows St Paul in seeing the whole human race under one head—Adam, from whom all have stemmed, just as all are redeemed by the New Adam who is Christ, Head of the Mystical Body wherein all are united by faith and love.

The teaching of Genesis, of St Paul, of the Church, lives on, as the Church's truth ever lives on, and today we can cite its contemporary expression:

'One of the fundamental doctrines of the Church is that *the human race is one*. The fact of its oneness is not altered by any secondary differences, such as differences in colour, in the various families that compose the human race. The Church teaches that the whole human race is descended from Adam and Eve, and has

3 Polygenism contradicts Romans v, 12-19, and so is condemned by the Encyclical *Humani Generis* (C.T.S. Edition, §37).

4 Cf. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Hebrew Lexicon*; Lisowsky, *Concordance*. The *Bible de Jérusalem* speaks of a 'collective' term.

therefore the same origin, the same nature, the same basic rights and duties, and the same supernatural destiny.

'Furthermore the whole of mankind is united in a common brotherhood in Christ. St Paul emphasized this truth when he wrote: "Through faith in Jesus Christ, you are all now God's sons. All you who have been baptized in Christ's name have put on the person of Christ; no more Jew or Gentile, no more slave or freeman, no more male and female; you are all one person in Jesus Christ" (Gal. iii, 26-28)'. Every man coming into this world, whatever his colour, whatever his human status, however lowly and disinherited has 'the same rights and duties, the same supernatural destiny'.

'Since the human race is essentially one, all men possess the same basic human rights. The Church declares that God gave every man certain rights when he gave him a soul. Among these rights the following are relevant (to the present subject):

The right to life and bodily integrity.
The right to the necessities of life and a decent living.
The right to worship.
The right to normal development of his faculties.
The right to private property and ownership.
The right to sojourn and movement.
The right to marriage and family life.
The right to give his children the education of his choice.
The right to associate with his fellow men.'[5]

Such are some of the great Catholic principles which should play their part in all the intricate network of human relationships and social situations. The principles are rooted in Genesis; their development and elaboration is in the keeping of the Church; the resultant principles are for all time.

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Now let us return again to our sources in the earlier part of Genesis, and consider another set of truths. As we read Genesis i-xi the story that unfolds is, among other things, a story of the spread of sin. There is the Fall, and then Cain and Abel, and . . . 'when the Lord saw that the wickedness of man on earth was great, and that every man's thought and all the inclinations of his heart were only evil, he regretted that he had made man on the earth' . . .

5 Joint Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Northern Rhodesia, 6/1/58.

(Genesis vi, 5-6) . . . 'the earth was corrupt and filled with violence' (Gen. vi, 11-12). There had to be a cleansing flood, type of the baptism to be (1 Peter iii, 21); but that was not the end of evil, for then we are given the sinister Tower of Babel story. For the multiplicity of tongues and the dispersion of men led to scissions in the human race. In that sense the dispersion of Babel is felt as yet another calamity. The Tower of Babel story explained to the Hebrew mind that evil which was the division of mankind into groups uncomprehending, alien and unfriendly. The whole theme is in the line of punishment and penalty, and yet one more consequence of sin. So too, we would suggest, for the theologian, racial segregation or 'apartness' is in the line of failure and sin and divisions. Walls and barriers are in fact built against the untrammelled exercise of ever-wider ranging love and generosity. We can see a parallel situation in the matter of war. In the theology of St Thomas, war is treated as something *opposite* to charity or love of God. The whole subject starts lamely. It is an outcome of the Fall and sin. Rules for a just war can be and are formulated: they are a ray of light, but in a universally darkened setting. It is always difficult to talk about a just war, though no doubt there have been some such in history. So, too, I would suggest, it is even more difficult or even impossible to talk about just, good and lawful racial segregation. Let us see what can be said, what distinctions are needed:

(*a*) There is a racial segregation embarked upon *to prevent collision between human beings*. This is just so much admission of moral failure.

(*b*) Racial segregation *voluntarily taken up* to safeguard cultures, religious values, worship of God. The obvious example of this were the Jews of the Old Testament period, who were deliberately and knowingly 'a people apart' because Israel became 'the manifest portion of God' (Ecclus. xvii, 15). This conviction and state of affairs was no doubt of their time and period in revelation. But the old order was to give way to the new wherein was neither Jew nor Greek, nor bond, nor free. Under Christ, now, we cannot go back to Old Testament ideologies, we cannot think of 'lesser breeds without the law', we can never again look upon certain human beings as necessarily hewers of wood and drawers of water.

(*c*) Finally there is racial segregation *forcibly imposed on others* and connoting racial discrimination. This is manifestly wrong and

utterly opposed to the spirit of Christ. Hence the very strongly worded Pastoral Letter on Apartheid, issued by the Hierarchy of South Africa (July 20, 1957). I quote a paragraph:

'It is a sin to humiliate one's fellow men. There is in each human person, by God's creation, a dignity inseparably connected with his quality of rational and free being. This dignity has been immeasurably enhanced by the mystery of our redemption. In the words of St Peter, we are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation" (I Peter ii, 9). Christ himself has said: "I have called you my friends" (John xv, 15). No one has the right to despise what God has honoured, to belittle one whom Christ has called friend, to brand a fellow man with the stigma of inborn inferiority. It is an insult to human dignity, a slur upon God's noble work of creation and redemption. Christ has warned us against inflicting such injuries ". . . any man who says Raca to his brother must answer for it before the Council: and anyone who says to his brother, Thou fool, must answer for it in hell fire" (Matt. v, 22). From this fundamental evil of apartheid flow the innumerable offences against charity and justice that are its inevitable consequence, for men must be hurt and injustice must be done when the practice of discrimination is enthroned as the supreme principle of the welfare of the state, the ultimate law from which all other laws derive.'

This same document refers to '. . . apartheid as something intrinsically evil. . . .' In view of Genesis and the Church's teaching generally, we could expect no other judgment.

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All our reflections so far suppose that we have a believer's notion of man. But we can ask ourselves again, What is man? or with the Psalmist sing:

'What is mortal man that you remember him?
Or Adam's son, that you care for him?' (viii, 5).

We can renew our ideas by once again considering the age-old lessons of Genesis. Man there is a unique creation of God: text and context of both creation narratives emphasize the purposeful intent of God (i, 26-27 and ii, 7). A further teaching is that man is *not matched* by any other creature in the universe, he is of *another* nature. 'He found no helper like himself' (ii, 20b). God alone can make a creature of the same human nature with the same immortal soul, and God does so: 'I will make him a helper like himself . . .'

(ii, 18). Because of his special, unique and higher nature, man is to rule or have dominion over all other creatures (Genesis i, 28). This dominion over all is represented as flowing immediately upon his being created: 'Let us make man . . . let him have dominion. . . .' We can say it has one of God's first intentions about man and his rôle and place in the universe. The second creation narrative adds a specific characteristic; man is to name the animals, for 'that which man called each would be its name' (ii, 19). In other words, man is represented as exercising a function of mind; man recognizes, distinguishes, 'penetrates' the nature and realities of other creatures. 'Naming' is much more than attaching a label: it supposes that we know as a human being can know, intelligently, even if imperfectly, *what* is to be named. Genesis furnishes here a simple way of conveying *intelligence*, or the specific and distinguishing element in man, that is in each and every being who has this human nature and so the rights and duties which flow from it.

All this concerns that which is essential and specific in man; all other differences between man and man, or race and race, are secondary or 'accidental', and concern rather the bodily side of man wherein he resembles the animals. Many of these differences are, and remain, interesting natural mysteries. 'Race' itself is very difficult to analyse:[6] thus obvious somatic differences are contradicted by blood-group facts. And skin colour is admitted by all experts to be no criterion of racial differences—any more than for horses. Chestnut, greys, black and white, all are horses, and all have the *nature* of horse. These happy beings seem to be free from colour prejudice! Negroid, Mongol, and other marked human characteristics are all 'accidental' differences, and indeed are far less pronounced than those of greyhounds, pomeranians, terriers, poodles, pekinese, and great danes, all of which have the nature of 'dog'.

Cutting across these differences is another set brought about by inequalities in education and development. There are, always, somewhere, 'lessened' men or minors, backward peoples (perhaps made so by long years of oppression), the illiterate, and the degenerate. All these, whatever their category, have rights: 'the rights of each and all as human beings remain intact'.[7]

6 Cf. N. C. Dunn, *Race and Biology*. U.N.E.S.C.O., Paris, 1953.
7 John Eppstein, *The Church and the Law of Nations*, p. 397.

The Book of Genesis teaches us still more. Thus there is a seal set upon God's special handiwork or man, for man is in the image of God (Genesis i, 26). St Thomas explains that this image of God is threefold. First, simply by the very fact of his being created, every man is in the image of God. Then there is the imaging of the re-created or redeemed who are in the grace of Christ, and finally the imaging of God in the next life, among the blessed.

That this image of God is in all men is a teaching of Genesis as of our theology. It is then incumbent on every believer to recognize the reality in every single one who shares our human nature. This is simply a recognition of what is, through God's creative power. And of course this 'mirroring' of God makes effective a one-ness of every nation tribe and tongue, of every colour of feature and cranial measurement and much else.

All who mirror God in varying degree (the variety is due to grace and moral states only) constitute a multiracial society, one in its knowledge and love of God; and we know it as the Church. The Church on earth is preparing for the Church in heaven. We can have glimpses of this glory to come:

'After this I saw a great multitude which no man could number, out of all nations and tribes and peoples and tongues. Standing before the throne and the Lamb, clothed in white robes and with palms in their hands. And they cried with a loud voice saying,

Salvation belongs to our God
Who sits upon the throne
And to the Lamb.' (Apoc. vii, 9-10.)

NOTICE

We have been asked to bring to the notice of our readers that CATHOLIC DOCUMENTS, that most useful periodical containing Papal pronouncements and decisions in English, will in future, by arrangement with the Pontifical Court Club and the Salesian Press, be published and distributed by Messrs Thomas Nelson and Sons.