

Pigmentation and Christian Morals

by J. M. Cameron

Every man of sense who has had to fill up a form in which there is a space labelled 'race' must have been tempted to write down 'human'. That 'Caucasian' (an echo of a long obsolete ethnological theory) or 'Negro' should be required answers has profound moral and political significance in our time. It represents the enchantment of the intellect by a myth comparable in its power and in its forbidding consequences to the myth of antisemitism. The follies and cruelties that go with this enchantment are well known and need not be listed. We may well suspect that the spell that binds so many cannot be broken by argument, that time spent in examining the sophistries of racialist theory (resting for the most part on a radical confusion of phenotype with genotype) is time wasted. But Christians at least have a duty to examine their consciences and their presuppositions, both in order to correct their attitudes and in order to know how to witness to the truth in the world of our day.

What we do in unavoidable ignorance of how things are may be excusable or perhaps meritorious, even in those cases where a knowledge of how things are would have prompted us to quite other courses. What we do in avoidable ignorance of how things are, as when a man gets himself into the state of mind in which he believes that the Jews are responsible for world poverty or that foxes and hares take pleasure in being chased by dogs, is not excusable, for we have a general duty to inform ourselves about matters where information is to be had without extraordinary gifts and efforts. This is in general the case among all Europeans and North Americans in the matter of race. If they think that the pigmentation of the skin is relevant to how a man ought to be treated by the laws or by his neighbours they are certainly, in the usual phrase, the victims of prejudice; but the suggestion of helplessness conveyed by the use of the term 'victims' is misleading.

In the first place, if they are Christians, as many of them nominally are, they have Scripture against them. In Scripture they will learn that God has made of one blood all the peoples of the earth; and this simply confirms what is a matter of common observation, namely, that mankind is a single species, that all groups of men, no matter how much they may differ in the pigmentation of their skin, the shapes of their skulls, or the amount and texture of the hair on their bodies, are able to interbreed and their offspring is not sterile,

except *per accidens*. At almost all periods groups of men of very different external characteristics who have come into contact have in fact interbred, with the consequence that almost all human groups have an extraordinarily rich pool of genetic material upon which to draw. Genetic differences are of great importance between individuals; but it is virtually certain that marked differences between groups of people are culturally and not genetically determined. Again, there is, outside the communities of the South African Calvinists and many of the Protestant communities south of the Mason-Dixon line, a consensus among all those who hold office as spokesmen in Christian communities that the practices of racialism at best fall below and at worst violate the ordinary standards of Christian morality. In a confused way men in general recognize this and present their own darling prejudices as special cases or as unavoidable concessions to hard facts.

One of the problems involved in giving an account of what Christian morality has to say on the subject of racialism, especially that most debased form of the superstition that is obsessed with the importance of skin pigmentation, is that modern racialism, as distinct from ethnocentrism (the latter is a feature of most 'closed' moralities), is a relatively new phenomenon, strongest in the Protestant cultures of northern Europe and North America but inconceivable without the presence of modern ways of thinking about biological inheritance. Of course, as a science modern biology gives no support to racist theories; but the notions of inheritance derived in a vulgarized form from the theories of Lamarck, Darwin and Mendel give it a kind of surface respectability. Characteristics, acquired or innate, are thought to be inherited, to be matters of physical determination. And since the phenotypical is something that can be determined by common observation, what more plausible than that the whole complex of observable characteristics of, say, Negroes in Alabama or West Indians in Birmingham, should be regarded as genetically determined? And if what is open to common observation should be regarded with fear or repugnance by groups whose phenotypes are markedly different or, more commonly, by groups who are not only different in respect of pigmentation and the rest but are also relatively, and precariously, privileged in relation to the despised group, what more likely than that a crude and fallaciously grounded racial theory should gather to itself a vast and complex mass of folklore, superstition and delusion? Racialism, then, far from being something 'primitive' or 'medieval', as liberal thinkers are incautiously inclined to say, is an attitude as characteristic of modern civilization as vulgar Freudianism, vulgar Marxism and vulgar behaviourism.

At this point one is inclined to say that the remedy for this state of affairs is more information, more skilfully conducted education and, above all, that change which is always being called for by

those who shake their heads over the state of the world as they, so to speak, reach for another slice of cake: a change of heart. Those who call for a change of heart also enunciate other principles, dubious in the light of history and experience, such as that moral attitudes cannot be changed by legislation. Now, certainly no one can object if a man undergoes a change of heart in the matter of racialism or if he adopts a praiseworthy attitude in advance of any legislative requirement. It does in fact happen that here and there, in the Deep South of the United States, in the Union of South Africa and, no doubt, in those areas of our great cities where racial prejudice is beginning to show itself, individual men do from time to time undergo an experience of moral conversion and as a result of this come out against the mores of their societies. But in the nature of things such conversions are rare, and the heroism needed to act out the conversion rarer still. But it is idle to expect mass conversions in matters where men think, however mistakenly, their basic interests to be in question; and in any case we misconceive the task of moral education if we think of it as requiring us to change the isolated moral consciousness of the individual man.

The model of moral thinking and moral decision presupposed by the liberal societies of the West is at best a guide to only half the truth about morality. It is true that we are all of us, in relatively open and pluralistic societies, from time to time faced with agonizing or perplexing moral situations in which each man chooses for himself and, where he goes against what his social group expects of him, in loneliness. But even such a man possesses his human substance only in virtue of his membership of and his previous education in a society. He does not possess a human individuality existing over against society. *Ni ange, ni bête*, he is human only through his participation in the life of communication with others, a participation most vividly represented in his using a language, something essentially and not accidentally social. And just as there could not be a private language, that is, a language which only I *could* understand, so there could not be a private morality, that is, a morality which had claims only upon the single individual. Again, morality is mediated to men in a thousand ways; and one of these is undoubtedly the law. When Britain first began to put down the business of stealing men and selling them for profit it is unlikely that the men who did well out of the business and the many who were totally indifferent to it had an inner consciousness of wrong-doing. But in this matter, as in many others, the law was truly a moral education, *disciplina* in the original sense, a teaching; and one that was effective within a generation, so that what was formerly taken for granted as a part of the permanent furniture of society swiftly came to be thought loathsome.

Changing the moral attitudes of men is thus primarily a social process. We cannot rely upon pious exhortations beseeching men, as individuals, to change their moral attitudes. And the offences against

justice and charity in the matter of race relations are so grave that it is as unthinkable that race relations should be dealt with outside the framework of the law as that physical assaults upon the person or gross libels should be so dealt with. It would be strange to maintain that these latter offences should be dealt with by exhortations to a change of heart. The gravity of the former offences is no longer a matter of speculation. It has been documented by the recently published survey on Racial Discrimination by P.E.P. The central facts brought out by the survey may be summarized in a single quotation:

It should not be assumed . . . that immigrants are a group of people hyper-sensitive about their colour and ready to cry 'discrimination' or 'colour bar' at the slightest provocation. What does not emerge from categorized responses but does emerge from a reading of the individual responses is the quality of the dramatic and often humiliating experiences on which they are based: from people moving from their seat when they sat next to them on the bus, or putting change on the counter rather than into their hand, or pulling white children away from their children in church to verbal or physical violence in the streets or racialist slogans on the wall; to discrimination in the basic requirements of life, work and homes.

And we should note the sober conclusion of the P.E.P. research team after a careful scrutiny of the evidence:

In all cases where there is independent evidence of discrimination the extent of discrimination claimed by immigrants is shown to be substantially less than the independent evidence would suggest (*Racial Discrimination*, p. 16).

Law in our society is necessarily tied to coercion, not in the sense that the observance of the laws would promptly cease should the authorities lose their coercive powers, but in the sense that law requires a final sanction in the marginal cases. No doubt habit and prudence bring about law-abiding behaviour in the general case, though the recognition of law as a *disciplina*, different from those moral rules and sensible patterns of behaviour not backed by legal sanctions, may be an essential element in inducing such behaviour. It is interesting that there is some evidence to show that the present law forbidding discrimination in hotel accommodation has already, in the course of twelve months, had a considerable effect (*Racial Discrimination*, p. 101). Now, it is also plain that in theory, and in practice in small, homogeneous societies, there could be laws that functioned as teaching without there being penal sanctions attached to them; and it seems evident that such a situation is inherently superior to a situation in which some men at least are coerced into behaving well only by threats of punishment. We might even argue that there is in human society a kind of dynamic, noted by Hegel and by a few optimistic Christians, towards the realization of a rational and loving society that will not need penal sanctions for its

well-being. But there can be a confusion here. From the truism that such a society would be inherently superior to our present society which depends for its functioning upon habit, passion and force, it cannot be argued that within our present society obvious social evils are best dealt with by a rational persuasion not backed by sanctions or by an appeal to men to love one another. This would be to prefer the claims of love to those of justice *where the claims of justice have not been satisfied* and would be a piece of humbug, as when it is argued on behalf of those who exploit proletarians or slaves that they are uncommonly kind to those they exploit, giving them out of charity what they owe to them in justice. One can understand and sympathize with those early antinomians who thought that the signs of the *parousia*, when, it goes without saying, love would be all in all, were evident in the midst of the sinful world; but those who inhabit the world of today, the world of napalm, nuclear bombs, racial discrimination and brainwashing by experts in advertising and public relations, utter a kind of blasphemy when they turn away from the employment of legal sanctions for decent social ends to the kind of idle moralizing characteristic of such movements as Moral Rearmament. Let us by all means change men's hearts; but let us recognize that the law, as *disciplina*, is a necessary piece of teaching where the spontaneity of love is choked and the empire of reason limited.

Christians who may deplore the uglier manifestations of racialism sometimes defend the status quo and argue for a reliance on moral and rational persuasives not backed by law because they hold the following theory. The theory is to the effect that it is a part of the providential ordering of the world that there are differences between ethnic groups and patterns of culture; and that to respect and preserve these differences is a part of natural piety towards the order of the world. Such an argument is sometimes used by those Calvinist theologians who offer a sophisticated defence of the policy of *Apartheid*. There is a half-truth in the theory, namely, that the variety of creation is something to be glad about and that it is a mark of the maturity and excellence of a society if it is able to tolerate varieties of appearances, styles of life, intellectual attitudes and so on. But the theory as it is in fact employed is used to justify, not variety within a single society, but the attempt to set up uniform societies isolated from each other; and covertly to insinuate that certain groups are intrinsically superior to others. In any case, differences between ethnic groups at any given time are the outcome of the past intermingling of ethnic groups and are essentially provisional just because of what mankind is in creation, one in 'blood', the plain sign of this being the biological unity of the species. Where racial distinctions are used to impose inequality of treatment in such matters as employment and housing, or where these distinctions are a basis for legal discrimination between 'white', say, and 'coloured', then it is safe to say that at least some of these groups accept these distinctions

unwillingly and their acceptance is governed by custom backed by terror and, sometimes, by laws. Here, not only is there no question of a respect for the cultural differences between groups, the cultural differences between the groups may scarcely exist and may be a matter of mythology. The Negroes of the southern United States do not have a separate and viable culture that marks them off from the poor whites of the region. They are under-privileged Americans. If they seem, as many observers think, rather more agreeable people than their poor white neighbours who form the anti-Negro mobs, then this simply illustrates the truism that those who suffer evil are more fortunate than those who inflict it.

For long it seemed that British society was relatively tranquil, in matters of race relations as in other matters. It was not noted that this tranquillity rested in part upon the British ability to keep its social tensions at a distance from the metropolitan country, in Ireland, say, or India. Now it is evident that racial conflict, on a small scale as compared with many other countries but serious enough, is a characteristic of some parts of the metropolitan country. This has been copiously documented by P.E.P. and in a variety of other studies. Christians have now to make up their minds what their calling requires of them in the matter. They can remain on the level of fantasy and content themselves with moralizing from the pulpit and in the press, asking for 'a change of heart'; or they can put themselves at the disposal of the movement to deal with this social evil, as men have dealt with other social evils in the past, by legislation. The *disciplina* of the law is not something that men in the process of being redeemed can afford to neglect.