



# A History of Racism in the United States

## SESSION 4

| 1973–Present: Post-Movement Time: Racism Redefined

### Introduction

The previous three sessions traced the development of racism from 1492 through 1972. This final session examines racism from 1973 to the present day. We in the United States have reason to be hopeful about the state of racism in this nation. After all, we are increasingly diverse, and the leadership of the country is beginning to represent that diversity. But the church demonstrates how much racism has evolved and yet remained in place. Despite leadership of color in the church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) remains 94 percent white. As of 2009, the U.S. Senate includes only four people of color: one African American (Roland Burris, D-IL), one Asian American (Daniel Akaka, D-HI), and two Latinos (Melquiades Martinez, R-FL; Robert Menendez, D-NJ),<sup>1</sup> not to mention the underrepresentation of Native Americans (zero) and women (seventeen).<sup>2</sup>

Representation is also an issue on corporate boards, with Asian American men in particular disproportionately absent despite their presence in the professional workforce. Media portrayals of various groups of people of color leave much to be desired. African American and Latino men are disproportionately part of the prison population. Immigration is a continuing vehicle for cultural racism. Neocolonialism in Asia and Latin America serve as contemporary extensions of the doctrine of manifest destiny we discussed in session 2. In this session, we discuss just a few contemporary manifestations and invite your continued reflections on the ways in which racism is present in our everyday lives.



Little Islamic Girl © Marusia—Fotolia.com

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### Criminalization and Legalized Disenfranchisement

The last legal obstacles to full citizenship for African Americans were eliminated with the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Citizenship implies full participation in society, including voting. This is not true for people who have been convicted of felonies. Laws criminalizing drug use and sentencing patterns emerged with a disproportionate impact on African Americans. Almost 25 percent of all African American men in their thirties had been to prison by 2003.<sup>3</sup> Thirteen percent of African American men are ineligible to vote due to felony convictions. Many argue that people who have performed a criminal act need to be punished (some would argue that rehabilitation would be more effective, but the U.S. judicial system tends toward punitive measures rather than restorative). However, sentencing varies based not

on the crime committed but the ways in which people of different races are charged (with possession, or with possession with the intent to distribute), and the types of drugs. For example, crack cocaine is cheaper and more likely to be used by African Americans than powder cocaine, which is more likely to be used by white people. Users of powder cocaine need to possess 100 times more cocaine than do users of crack cocaine in order to receive the same sentence. Because of the differences in sentencing, the disproportionate impact is on poor people of color from urban areas.<sup>4</sup>

The criminal justice system impacts the way African Americans in particular experience citizenship. Convicted felons who have served their time in prison and completed probation remain ineligible to vote in most states. Only Maine and Vermont allow prison inmates the right to vote.<sup>5</sup> Thirty-five states prohibit felons on parole from voting. Several states do not allow felons who have completed their sentences to vote, while others require felons go through a waiting time and a process before being able to vote again. Given the disproportionate numbers of African American and Latino men in prison, and the disproportionate sentences given to people of color, we might say the result of these laws is the restriction of citizenship based on race.

## Anti-Arab Racism, Immigration, and Neocolonialism

The war on terror, along with a continuing sociopolitical focus on the vaguely defined Middle East, has helped define a prominent process of racialization. Over recent years, mainstream movies have turned to portraying Arabic-speaking villains without families, fear, or compassion. A pre-9/11 example of this is the 1994 movie “True Lies,” in which several Arabic-speaking male characters of undetermined national origin plot to use a nuclear weapon if the U.S. does not meet their demands.<sup>6</sup> Positive portrayals by Arab American actors are rarely of Arab American characters. Adrian Monk, assumed to be white, is played by Tony Shalhoub, an American of Lebanese descent.

Are Arabs a race? As comedian Dean Obeidallah, on the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, states, “I used to be a white guy. After September 11th, I became an Arab.”<sup>7</sup> Arab Americans are considered white in the legal racial construction of the United States. Arabs, a classification

## Resistance: Spoken Word and Comedy

Many artists and poets have emerged from communities of color. Such spoken word groups as Yellow Rage and the Taco Shop Poets, and artists like Marlon Esguerra bring their cultural and racial experiences to light, and critique racism in the U.S. Comedians Ahmed Ahmed, Maz Jobrani, Dean Obeidallah, and Aron Kader brought their Arab American and Iranian American experiences together to create the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour. The Axis of Evil and Korean American comedian Margaret Cho in her “I’m the One That I Want” comedy tour have provided a strong counterpoint to dominant social narratives about people of color from the perspective of people of color.

often conflated with “Muslims,” are a group more prominently racialized after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. The post-9/11 discourse on “evil” expressed by President George W. Bush and other leadership conflate Islam, terrorism, and Arabs with one another. In 2004, then House Majority Leader Tom DeLay gave a speech in which the word “evil” was used almost twenty times to describe the so-called Arab world.<sup>8</sup> As English professor Steven Salaita points out, terrorism is a “highly subjective term and its subjectivity has been used to highlight Arab violence disproportionately while comparable American and Israeli violence is disregarded.”<sup>9</sup> Anti-Arab racism is reflected in U.S. culture in the media, popular culture, and the Bush-era discourse of the “war on terror.” After 9/11, Muslim communities report increased difficulty with securing permits to build mosques for worship. Of course, not all Arabs are Muslim. Not all Muslims are Arabs. Not all Arabs or Muslims are terrorists. In fact, adherents to Islam span a wide theological and political spectrum, similar to the spectrum of practicing Christians. This conflation in the American imagination of Arab/Muslim/terrorist creates a racialized category, whose members are assumed to participate in destructive behavior.

After September 11, 2001, hate crimes against people who looked Arab increased dramatically. It was telling that between September 11 and September 13, the Council on American-Islamic Relations received over

300 reports of harassment and abuse. The first murder was of a Sikh South Asian man in Arizona, believed to be targeted because of his turban and long beard characteristic of Sikh adherents.<sup>10</sup> The aftermath of September 11 included voluntary registration by men from twenty majority-Muslim and Arab countries.<sup>11</sup> These voluntary registrations resulted in hundreds of men disappearing for months at a time, thanks to the government's "hold until cleared" policy.<sup>12</sup> Many were deported, and most were held in detention without the ability to contact their families.

The debate regarding immigration reform and enforcement has cycled through both cultural and systemic racism. Vigilantes on the border between the U.S. and Mexico engage in anti-Latino violence, while they believe they are assisting the U.S. Border Patrol in finding and turning back people crossing the border. A more recent phenomenon has surfaced in which mostly white youth go looking for "Mexicans." This is known as "beaner hunting."<sup>13</sup> A simple Internet search results both in editorials denouncing racially motivated attacks that have resulted in the murder of a Long Island resident (an Ecuadorian man), and in Web sites and video postings promoting such attacks. Border enforcement, beginning in 1994, has forced migration further east. In fact, rather than slowing down undocumented crossings, these crossings have become more dangerous, and those who cross successfully are more likely to stay longer and also bring their families because going home for a visit is now far more difficult.<sup>14</sup> The naturalization process involves quotas, which do not reflect colonial histories or current flows of migration. It is a fact that colonization by western countries result in later immigration of those previous colonial subjects (Indian and Pakistani migration to Great Britain, Filipino migration to the U.S.). Quotas established in 1976 put the limit of people who may enter from the Western Hemisphere each year at 20,000. The effect is that those with a previous economic relationship with the U.S., usually countries populated by people who become racial minorities upon entry into the U.S., find it far more difficult to come legally because migration is far more common.

Many countries, such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, have experienced the U.S. as a neocolonizing power. Neocolonialism describes economic control or dominance of one country over another, and may or may not include control over the government. The U.S.



Illegal Immigration © Rusty Dodson—Fotolia.com

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continues to assert neocolonial control throughout this time period over various countries in Asia and Latin America, in particular. What does this have to do with racism in the United States? After all, our relationships to other countries are not racialized, are they?

The doctrine of manifest destiny, referenced in session 2, was developed to justify the U.S. reach into Mexican territories by proclaiming the U.S. to be superior. This superiority complex filtered into U.S. foreign policy. The Iran-Contra affair, revealed in 1986, is one such example of U.S. interference colored by manifest destiny. The U.S. sold arms to Iran, without regard for the eventual cost this might have for Iranians, in exchange for U.S. hostages being held in Iran. The proceeds from the arms sales went to fund the cause of the pro-U.S. government Contra rebels in Nicaragua. The fight between the various Contra groups and the ruling Sandinistas in Nicaragua was an internal struggle over power and forms of government; U.S. funding of the Contras became neocolonial interference. The Sandinistas are communist, and the U.S. has a history of finding ways to subvert communism in other countries in order to support capitalism, an economic system more beneficial to the U.S.

## The Level Playing Field and Multiculturalism

We in the U.S. hold onto the myth of meritocracy, the belief that the U.S. is a system in which people gain positions based solely on their talent, and not on their wealth, connections, class status, racial and cultural

## The Resistance: Japanese American Protest against Muslim Detentions

Arab and South Asian immigrants detained after September 11 found their situation was not viewed in isolation. These detentions, which typically resulted in no charges or convictions beyond proving the Muslim faith of those detained, resonated with the Japanese American community. Japanese American organizations spoke out against the detentions without warrant as stemming from the same racism that imprisoned 120,000 people of Japanese descent during World War II. The children of Gordon Hirabayashi, Fred Korematsu, and Minoru Yasui (all of whom were interned and filed a case against the government) filed an amicus brief on behalf of Arab and South Asian immigrants detained after September 11, arguing similarities between the internment experiences and that the equal protection clauses in the Constitution ought to be applied in such cases.<sup>15</sup>

background, or other measures of power and privilege. This is founded on a belief that we begin on a level playing field, resources are distributed equally, and earnings are based solely on a person's merit. Unfortunately, factors such as citizenship, class status and access, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion have shaping factors such that meritocracy does not exist. A part of this myth is woven together with the belief that affirmative action is no longer necessary. Now that the playing field has been leveled, as of the 1960s and 1970s, any suspicion of affirmative action is subject to social inquiry.

In 1998, during a celebration of the Martin Luther King Jr. Day at a university, the president of the university gave an introduction to the celebration beginning with, "None of you are here because of affirmative action." The featured speaker, Dr. Midori Takagi (a history, American studies, and women's studies professor), stood up after the president sat down and began with: "All of us are here because of affirmative action." Her message was that affirmative action was good for society because it provided opportunities to those usually deprived of any privileges. (For a more comprehensive look at affirmative action, refer to the Thoughtful Christian study "Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?")

More recently, President Obama's nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the U.S. Supreme Court evoked a frightening array of criticisms emerging from the general stream of suspicion of her qualifications due to her status as a woman of color. Surely she, as a product of affirmative action, is less qualified than other (implied) possible candidates, regardless of the fact that she had more experience as a judge than all other nominees throughout U.S. history. *The New Republic's* Jeffrey Rosen called Sotomayor an "'intellectual lightweight' who was 'picked because she was a woman and Hispanic.'"<sup>16</sup> This narrative was purported to be part of a larger and perfectly valid exploration of her fitness to be appointed to the Supreme Court. However, it might be noted that Justice John Roberts was questioned primarily about his positions, beliefs, and job history, not his race or gender. The line of questioning regarding Sotomayor, focusing on her demographics as a determining factor of her competence and her qualifications, is quite different.

Appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court like Clarence Thomas and Sonia Sotomayor have lifted up elements of the ways in which multiculturalism can be racist. The only way these appointments will succeed in not changing the system is if the individuals share enough of the values of the U.S. judicial system that they will not change it. The attacks against Sotomayor may be a manifestation of the fear that her appointment will change the status quo, as the defenders of the system do not see her as someone who will allow the U.S. judicial system to remain much as it is.

Multiculturalism lifts up racial and other differences and views them as making valuable contributions to education or the workforce. Racist multiculturalism, which came into force in the 1980s, perpetuates racism by seeking to make institutions look good without committing to changing the status quo. The social assumption is if a person of color is placed in a white system, the system is free of its racism. Every institution has layers of its identity. The easiest layer to change is personnel. The deepest and most difficult layer to change is that of mission. Racist multiculturalism only seeks to bring diversity at the level of personnel and maybe programs, but the status quo and power relationships established around the mission remain unchanged. Without any shift in the culture of the institution or its policies, racist multiculturalism aims to manage and control diversity

and its impact on the organization, and is posed as the end of the journey.

In contrast, antiracist multiculturalism aims to transform the institution's relationship to its diverse communities, and seeks to share power evenly among different people. Antiracist multiculturalism sees its approach as a step on the path to becoming the beloved community, and understands it is not yet an embodiment of the beloved community. This approach to multiculturalism has the self-awareness to examine and change each layer of the organization as part of its antiracist commitment. Only if Sotomayor's presence drastically changes rulings made by the Supreme Court, or better yet, changes how the U.S. defines and processes legal questions, will her appointment be a dramatic departure toward antiracist multiculturalism. However, if those approving the appointment understand this is one step toward a more just society around issues of race and class, it may be possible that this appointment can be a part of a larger vision for antiracist multiculturalism. If her appointment is as the last female or person of color to the U.S. Supreme Court, we know her presence played into racist multiculturalism.

## Conclusion

Contemporary racism from 1973 until now has multiple manifestations. The writers were able to explore only a few. However, throughout these four sessions, we hope we were able to provide you with some tools to think through the ways in which racism has developed and is now manifested. As Christians, we are called in our baptism to a new life. We engage in relationship with God. We live in broken systemic relationships that belie our life of faith. If we are to engage in the healing of this world, we are greatly helped by a historical understanding of how this system of racism developed in the United States.

## About the Writers

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## Endnotes

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