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Toward the Abolition of "Race"

Bendi Benson Schrambach

Whitworth University, bbschrambach@whitworth.edu

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Abstract: Toward the Abolition of “Race”

Inspired by France’s decision to strike the word “race” from the nation’s law books, this essay describes an investigation into the biblical, etymological, historical, sociological and scientific evidence related to the term. It commences with an examination of biblical verses for which some translators haven chosen the word “race.” The article demonstrates that, in each case, the passage in question does not denote phenotypic peculiarity but something else. It next looks at biblical characters whose physical features are highlighted as being distinctive and finds that “race” is conspicuously absent from all English translations of these passages. The origins of the term and its evolution—outside of any biblical context—are then discussed, as is the scientific evidence surrounding the notion. This is followed by a consideration of the current usage of the word to denote a social construct. Recalling the power of language as manifested in the Bible and as described by linguists Sapir and Whorf, the article concludes by recommending the suppression of the term entirely.

Toward the Abolition of “Race”

Bendi Benson Schrambach, Whitworth University

Responding to a campaign promise made by French President François Hollande, the French National Assembly voted in May of 2013 to strike the word “race” from the nation’s law books.¹ Presenting the bill to Parliament, Martinican politician Alfred Marie-Jeanne called “race” an “aberrant concept, one that has served as the basis for atrocious ideologies” (“L’Assemblée nationale”).² The socialist majority, likewise, hailed the move as a positive “first step” (Oberti). Yet to stave off criticism by those unconvinced of the effectiveness of the action, the Parliament adopted an amendment declaring that the French Republic would “combat racism, anti-Semitism and xenophobia” (Oberti).

Hearing for the first time of President Hollande’s crusade while leading a study program in France, I was deeply troubled. Like that of UPM politician Lionel Tardy, my initial reaction was that one “cannot change reality by simply changing the words,” and that those involved were obviously “wasting a lot of time and energy on illusions” (Brown). Eradicating the word “race” could eliminate racism, I surmised, about as effectively as renaming Simon had transformed the apostle into an unwavering pillar of faith.

Nevertheless, before joining my voice to that of others denouncing the move, I decided to investigate what the Bible has to say about “race.” The following is a review of passages for which some English translators have chosen the word “race.” These are ordered in terms of

¹ Hollande’s call to remove the term from the Constitution, lacking the required three-fifths majority, remains outstanding.

² All translations from French are my own.

frequency, beginning with the verses in which the term appears most often and ending with examples where it is less frequently employed.

“Race” first appears in several translations of Ezra 9:2. The New International Version renders the text as follows: “They have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, and have mingled the holy race with the peoples around them. And the leaders and officials have led the way in this unfaithfulness” (Ezra 9:2). The Hebrew word here translated as “race” is “*zerah*.” It literally means “seed,” and can, according to the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, be used for plants (Gen 47:24), humans and animals (Jer 31:27), offspring or descendants (1 Sam 2:20; Gen 3:15; Gen 15:3; Ruth 4:12; Ezra 9:2), and descent (Ezra 2:59; Neh 7:61). Other translations of Ezra 9:2 represent the term as “seed” (*KJV*, *ASV*, and *NRSV*), “offspring” (*Amplified*), “descendants” (*CEB*), and “people” (*CEV*). In this verse, Ezra censures the Israelites for going against the directives of the Lord, established in Deuteronomy, against marrying those not following the Law of Moses. God explains his rationale for this precept thus: “for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods” (*NIV*, Deut 7:4). The concern raised in Ezra 9:2 is obviously not the phenotypic similarity or difference of the “peoples around them”: it was of no consequence whether the Persians with whom the remnant of Israel was intermarrying were darker or lighter in skin, hair, or eye pigmentation. Instead, the focus was on maintaining the set apart status of those descended – by faith³ or blood – from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

A second passage for which several biblical translations choose the term “race” is found in the book of Mark. The American Standard Version relates one woman’s encounter with Jesus thus: “Now the woman was a Greek, a Syrophoenician by race. And she besought him that he

³ For Biblical examples of the incorporation of foreigners into the nation of Israel, see J. Daniel Hays.

would cast forth the demon out of her daughter” (Mark 7:26). This Gospel author’s depiction emphasizes the woman’s status as a Gentile, a heathen according to Jewish Law. The word here rendered “race” is the Greek “γενει,” the dative form of “γένος.” According to *Strong’s Concordance*, it means “family” or “offspring.” Other renditions translate the verse as nationalistic affiliation (*KJV* and *Wycliffe*) or place of birth (*Message*, *ESV*, *NLV*, *NIV*, and *RSV*). It is important to remember that Phoenicia was, at the time of this Gospel’s composition, a maritime country belonging to Syria. The *NIV Study Bible* postulates that Mark may have used the term Syrophoenician “to distinguish this woman from the Libyan Phoenicians of North Africa” (1668). Any phenotypic peculiarity suggested by Mark’s portrayal is mitigated by the fact that the woman would have likely shared physical features more congruent with those of Jesus and his disciples than with the Phoenicians of Libya from whom she is explicitly differentiated. Other examples of such a usage occur in some translations of Acts 4:36, 18:2, and 18:24.

Another verse that sometimes contains the word “race” is 1 Peter 2:9. In this passage, the apostle exhorts first century believers to stand firm in the faith: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (*NAS*, 1 Peter 2:9). Again, the word rendered “race” is the same one employed in Mark 7:26: “γένος,” meaning “family” or “offspring.” Yet Peter writes not to a particular people group descending from a specific bloodline, but to persecuted Christians—both Jew and Greek. The term here implies nothing of phenotypic or genetic uniqueness. Instead, the apostle’s language underscores the privileged “lineage” of Christians through faith. This denotation of the word also appears in some renditions of Acts 7:13 and 7:19.

“Race” is also sometimes employed in Zechariah. Speaking of the fate of Israel’s enemies, the prophet foretells: “And a mongrel race will dwell in Ashdod, and I will cut off the pride of the Philistines” (NAS, Zech 9:6). According to the *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, the transliterated Hebrew term here rendered “race” is “mamzer”; it literally means “bastard,” or child born of an incestuous union. It is also used in Deuteronomy 23:3 when describing the incestuously-conceived descendants of Lot. “Race” here denotes not phenotypic uniqueness but adulterated lineage: the offspring resulting from procreation occurring outside of the precepts of God.

Paul’s letter to the church in Rome offers one final example. The apostle writes: “For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race” (NIV, Romans 9:3). Here, Paul expresses concern for fellow Hebrews who had not accepted the message of the Gospel. He calls them “my people,” “ἀδελφῶν” in Greek. This term, appearing in other passages of the Bible as “my brothers,” signifies a close but not always biological relationship. Indeed, Paul employs a version of this same term to describe his brothers and sisters in Christ—both Jewish and Gentile—sixteen times in Romans alone.⁴ The term translated as “race” is “σάρκα.” According to *Strong’s Concordance*, it can signify “flesh,” “body,” “human nature,” “materiality,” and “kindred.” Paul’s focus in this passage is his shared religious heritage with the Jews; they, like Paul, are sons and daughters of Abraham. They are kindred in their humanness, in their carnal nature, in their fleshly form—the color of said flesh notwithstanding. This is all the more obvious since we know that the Jews themselves were an ethnically diverse people (Hays 70-81). Here again, phenotype has nothing to do with Paul’s intended meaning in this verse.

⁴ Romans 1:13, 7:4, 8:12, 8:29, 10:1, 11:25, 12:1, 14:10, 14:13, 14:15, 14:21, 15:14, 15:30, 16:14, 16:17, 16:23.

Then there are biblical characters whose physical characteristics are highlighted as being distinctive. It is worth noting that in passages describing these people, “race” appears in *none* of the English renditions. Phinehas, for example, looked quite different than many of his contemporary Jews. J. Daniel Hays relates the significance of the name of this descendant of Levi, which translates literally as “‘the Negro,’ ‘the Nubian,’ or ‘the Cushite’: that is, one of the Black people who inhabit the land of Cush” (81). Yet despite the dissimilarity implicit in the very name of this prominent priest, the word “race” is never mentioned when chronicling him—whether in Exodus 6, Numbers 25 and 31, or Psalm 106.

Moses’ second wife is another biblical character whose physiognomy is intimated in Scripture. The book of Numbers records: “Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite” (*NIV*, Num 12:1). Hays claims that, like Phineas, the woman in question was most likely a “Black African” (81). Yet here again, despite an allusion to her physical alterity, this passage nowhere suggests that Moses’ second wife belonged to a “race” different from that of the people of Israel: the human race.

This review of “race’s” appearances in and conspicuous omissions from Scripture convinced me that the existence of distinct “races”—in terms of disparate categories or “types” of people—was, at least from a theological perspective, dubious. I turned next to the fields of etymology and sociology.

According to the *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, the original meaning of the word “race” was “family, tribe” (French “rasse,” Italian “razza,” Spanish and Portuguese, “raza”). It probably derived from the Arabic “ra’s,” related to the Hebrew “rosh,” meaning “head, beginning, origin” (Klein). The term first appeared in the 1500s, a detail

that explains why “race” did not figure in early English translations of the Bible – including Wycliffe, completed in 1395, and King James, finalized in 1611.

Theodore W. Allen’s *Invention of the White Race* narrates the history of this term in the United States. Allen describes how the powerful class in the American colonies *invented* the category of “white” as a means of asserting power over those not conforming physically to this descriptor. Anthropologist Peter Wade also examines the evolving perspectives on ethnic populations in the New World, focusing on Latin America. His conclusion: “the concept of race is... linked into a European history of thinking about difference, rather than a concept describing an objective reality” (14). Sociologist Ellis Cashmore also chronicles the evolution of this concept and its ultimate and unfortunate outcome: “[r]ace came to be used in the sense of type as designating species of men distinct both in physical constitution and mental capacities” (295). The eventual result of this conclusion was the cataloging of *Homo sapiens* into “racial” classifications, hierarchically ordered, based on believed innate differences (Wade 9).

This scientifically-endorsed notion of “race” had profound ideological implications. David Theo Goldberg submits that “race” became intertwined with basic ideas about morality. Whereas in previous eras, morality was defined in terms of virtue and correct behaviour, or of the prevention of sin, in the modern period, and with the discoveries, people began talking in terms of stocks or breeds of humans, people with engrained, natural qualities. Human identity and personhood became increasingly defined by a discourse of race, certain races became defined as non-rational or aesthetically inferior (lacking in the “natural” balance of beauty and harmony) and race could define certain people as fit for slavery. (9)

Racial categories, identified by phenotypic peculiarity, thus provided a justification for white domination, a rationale for subjugation of those designated as “other.” Even after the abolition of slavery, such notions continued to inform social policy in the twentieth century in the form of eugenics, embraced by Nazi Germany, which called for the restriction of the reproductive capacities of those judged biologically “unfit” or racially “inferior” (Wade 11-12).

I looked finally to the arena of science to determine if there was any genomic evidence to justify historically-entrenched claims. There, I learned that despite dramatic advances in the field of genetics and more than 200 years of inquiry aimed at delimiting the illusive “races,” most scientists now acknowledge the fragility of the entire concept.⁵ Cashmore summarizes the progress of our understanding in this area.

Physical anthropologists used to speak of human “races” in the sense of subspecies, the most common scheme being the great tripartite division of mankind into Negroid, Mongoloid, and Caucasoid. Over the last forty to fifty years, however, it became increasingly clear that no meaningful taxonomy of human races was possible. Not only were numerous groups not classifiable as belonging to any of the three main groups, but physical anthropologists could not agree with each other as to where the genetic boundaries between human groups were to be drawn, or even on how many such groups there were. (296-97)

Simply stated, “race” as a synonym for biological distinctiveness eludes empirical definitions. Yes, phenotypic and genetic variations exist between peoples. These cannot, however, be easily attributed to tidy designations such as “black” or “white.” Human migration and interbreeding

⁵ Recent rebuttals to scientific racism have come from the American Anthropological Association (“Race: Are We So Different?”), PBS (“Race: The Power of an Illusion”) and even the *Huffington Post* (Fuentes).

have resulted in the homogenization of the species such that there is no unadulterated “white” person, no consummate “black” person (Wade 12). The result is what the French would call *métissage* (hybridization).

But what about using the term “race” to designate a social construct? Indeed, most contemporary natural and social scientists endorse this usage as the only meaningful denotation of the word. According to this definition, “race” is designated in a given society based on mainly physical characteristics (Cashmore 297).

Audrey Smedley and Brian Smedley establish this premise at the outset of their *Race in North America*:

The position of this study is that race does indeed exist and should be viewed not as something biologically tangible and existing in the outside world that has to be discovered, described, and defined, but rather as a cultural creation, a product of human invention very much like fairies, leprechauns, banshees, ghosts, and werewolves. (4)

Smedley and Smedley tout this social construct as a positive means of (self-) identification and association. Wade likewise upholds the value of this constructed identity, which “represents for [some people] central aspects of their person” (13).

Yet isn't this only a milder, a sometimes self-selected, form of racism—since the very act of affixing a label to peoples suggests the existence of differences unique to each group? On this point, Cashmore appears to concur. He writes: “Societies that recognize social races are inevitably racist societies, in the sense that people, especially members of the dominant racial group, believe that physical phenotype is linked with intellectual, moral, and behavioral characteristics. Race and racism thus go hand in hand” (298).

Then there's the matter of the *culturally* created nature of this construct, also identified by Smedley and Smedley. The very origins of the term “race,” *created* as a signifier for “type” or “species” by the dominant European American *culture*, were corrupt. This lexical invention had as both objective and outcome the subjugation of those whose appearance was different from their own. The ugly American origins of this concept seem especially pertinent given the fact that, according to R. E. Hall, our socially-constructed identities draw much of their force from history, or the “different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past” (Gates 48-49).

Why would we adopt this term to designate *anything* intended to be positive? This cultural creation resulted in long-lasting segregation and continued separation. “Race” as a signifier for anything—including a social construct—is, in my judgment, irrevocably contaminated.

In sum, my investigation of the term “race,” inspired by France’s changed law books, led me to a different conclusion than I had expected. Indeed, my position now coincides more closely with that of the bill’s original presenter than with those of its detractors. Even the use of the term to designate a social group appears misguided, since any positive gains affected by this association are besmirched by the iniquitous nature of the original concept. I applaud the French proposal to strike the term entirely.

That is not to say that I agree with a recent title dismissing the significance of “race” in America (Wilson). On the contrary, I align myself more closely with the contention first postulated by W.E.B. Du Bois that the problem of our century remains the problem of the color line (9). I do not, moreover, deny the cultural and sociological differences between peoples. These are real and should be celebrated. Neither do I mean to diminish the reality of those

experiencing discrimination based upon the color of their skin. Racism exists and must be addressed.⁶ I do not recommend, finally, that we pursue policies promoting colorblindness. The news makes it painfully clear that such a strategy would be sorely ineffectual.

I am instead suggesting that we no longer use the misnomer “race” to identify different peoples of the earth—even if the reference is intended to denote a social construct.⁷ For unlike fabled fairies and legendary leprechauns, “race” is a term fraught with horror and strife. Unlike folkloric banshees and mythic werewolves, “race” has haunted and terrorized real people. It is tainted, like Paul de Man’s cachet after the discovery of his anti-Semitism, like Exxon Valdez’s earth-friendly reputation after the oil spill, like O.J. Simpson’s credibility following his courtroom denial and subsequent book manuscript about how he *hypothetically would have* killed his wife. When distinction need be made between peoples, a troubling matter in our broken humanity, I propose the employment of more meaningful language, such as “ethnicity,” “descent,” or “people groups,” terms void of historically-derived connotations of hierarchy.⁸

The Bible testifies to the power of words. The Lord *spoke* the world into existence; Jesus is the *Word* who became flesh; believers are exhorted to praise God and admonished against taking his name in vain. So while I am not suggesting that humans create reality via the speech they use (à la Word of Faith Movement), I am suggesting that words matter.

⁶ Some recent Christian titles attempting to make progress in this area include those of Brenda Salter McNeil and George Yancey.

⁷ I am not the first to make such an argument. Similar calls have been heard from evolutionary biologists and ethnographers (Huxley, Hadon and Carr-Saunders), political scientists (Prewitt), and theologians (Roetzel).

⁸ I include “ethnicity” despite my identification with Henry Louis Gates’ concern about “ethnicity’s” omission of “history, power relations, and... the history of power relations,” since “ethnicity” can denote both shared characteristics—such as language and religion—as well as background and allegiances (Gates 143-44).

It is an accepted tenant of linguistic anthropology that the lexicon of a language reflects the character and priorities of its culture. And while most theorists no longer ascribe to the linguistic determinism outlined by Sapir and Whorf, they do recognize the inextricable link between language and culture, language and worldview (Salzmann, Stanlaw, and Adachi).⁹ All languages prioritize certain concepts and—relative to other languages—neglect others, choices that reflect the culture in which the tongue is spoken.

Might our language be in part the reason that we remain so divided by “race” in America? Most societies neither use phenotypic similarity as a basis for group division nor even recognize the concept of “social races” (Cashmore 297-98). Yet we, in America, have developed quite an elaborate lexicon related to the notion. Could this semantic field, appropriating a term whose original meaning was finally debunked, have reinforced and framed our attitudes regarding “race” and, in effect, perpetuated our practice of “othering”? I submit that we have fixated on this word for too long.

It is for this reason that I move for an abolition of “race.” Will such an act end prejudice and bring about ethnic harmony? It is unlikely. Yet, by more accurately depicting the reality of our differences, this strategy could signal a small step in the right direction. Returning to my original assessment of the inefficacy of a new name in transforming Peter into a “rock” of belief, I was reminded that Jesus, though knowing of his friend’s future denial, still chose to rename his apostle. In so doing, he foretold the faithful leader that Peter would become.

⁹ This represents the weakened version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

The Lord understood the power of words. May we do likewise.¹⁰

¹⁰ I want to thank several colleagues, including Lawrence A. Burnley, Katherine Karr-Cornejo, Will Kynes, Gregg M. Brekke and Jonathan A. Moo, for their valuable contributions and insights. I am also indebted to my sister-in-law, Catherine Delest, for helping me think through this matter. Any errors in content or reasoning are my own.

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