

HOW DID WE LOSE OUR RACIAL COLOR BLINDNESS?

“We are whiter in our souls than the whitest of you. “

--The Black Queen of Meroe in the *Alexander Romance*

I would like to celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday with an instructive history lesson. We tend to think that the two great scourges of humankind, sexism and racism, have been around since the beginning of time.

With regard to sexism, this is true. Aristotle, for example, believed that women do not have rational souls, and he supported the traditional belief that women were simply the property of men. Aristotle did justify slavery, but, up until 400 years ago, just as many white as colored people were enslaved. Discrimination among the ancients was based primarily on judging people as barbarians rather than being colored.

Ancient Mediterranean civilizations were genuine multiracial societies. Africans were respected as statesman, craftsmen, priests, soldiers, writers, and musicians. Homer praised the Ethiopians for their justice and their piety. Terence, a black writer from Carthage, was given the same recognition as the white Roman Horace. No occupation was denied them, and every temple, church, or synagogue welcomed them. There were no laws against intermarriage and mixed couples were common.

Early Christian communities had the advantage of not only being nonracist but nonsexist as well. Going against the grain, Jesus, the ancient world's first true feminist, developed close relations with women, and the apostle Paul traveled with women preachers who were apparently equal in all respects. One of the first churches was at the home of Mary, John Mark's mother, and we now have evidence of women priests officiating in early Christian services.

The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) is proof that the early church meant what it said when it declared that all are equal in the Body of Christ. Early theologians drew an amazing, at least for us, analogy between Moses representing the Jewish Law and his black wife Zipporah symbolizing the Gentile Church. Protestant Bishop Joseph Hall preserved this traditional view: "Moses married a Blackamoor; Christ [married] his church. It is not for us to regard skin, but the soul."

The ancients distinguished very carefully between the color of sin and the color of skin. They color coded sin in the same way that most of do today: Black was the color of sin, evil, and death; and all things good and spiritual were white. In Indian souls with bad karma are colored black, but light as well as dark skinned Indians can possess these black souls. Indian discrimination is vicious only because it is based on caste not race.

Discrimination on the basis of skin color appears to have begun 400-500 years ago. In the middle of the 16th Century black immigrants in England were described as "barbarous, treacherous, libidinous, and jealous." Just as the juices of English racism started flowing, Shakespeare chose to throw out a challenge to his audiences. Othello, a former slave and Muslim, is presented as a virtuous Christian gentleman, while the white Iago, who himself admits that he has committed "the blackest of sins," is the incarnation of evil. Cassio celebrates the marriage of Othello and Desdemona as the union of a perfect soldier and perfect woman. A free, black man has risen to the top of Venetian society and he falls only because of Iago's deceit and his own blind jealousy.

In another article, I have explored the philosophical reasons why we lost the ancients' tolerance for racial differences. My conclusion is that modern people have emphasized the individual so much that they now view other people more as objects rather than subjects.

It is supremely ironic that those people who have been the victims of slavery and discrimination have a concept of human nature that is social and relational.

As Bishop Desmond Tutu states: "In Africa we say a person is a person through other persons. . . . The law of our being is that we have been created for togetherness, for communion." This is what Martin Luther King called "the beloved community."