Exploring the Pastoral Dynamics of Mixed-Race Persons

Peter Yuichi Clark¹,²

The number of persons in the United States who identify with more than one racial group is a steadily growing segment of the larger population. Yet pastoral care literature has not focused much attention to date on the spiritual care of multiracial people in America. This article intends to begin that conversation by examining their intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics, suggesting four directions of caring, and then exploring five implications for offering compassionate and relevant ministry.

KEY WORDS: multiracial; mixed-race; spiritual care.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly. But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

—Deuteronomy 7:1–6 NRSV

¹Peter Yuichi Clark, Ph.D., BCC, serves as Chaplain Administrator at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center and as Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care at the American Baptist Seminary of the West, both located in Berkeley, California.
²Address correspondence to Peter Yuichi Clark, Department of Chaplaincy Services, Alta Bates Summit Medical Center, 2450 Ashby Avenue, Berkeley, CA 94705-2067; e-mail: clarkp1@sutterhealth.org.
Thus said the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

—Jeremiah 29:4–7 Tanakh

INTRODUCTION

The issue of race is a socially constructed and enforced, complex, and conflictual dynamic for people living in the United States. As sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant observe,

Race is a concept [that] signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies. Although the concept of race invokes biologically based human characteristics (so-called “phenotypes”), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. In contrast to the other major distinction of this type, that of gender, there is no biological basis for distinguishing among human groups along the lines of race . . . [Yet] race will always be at the center of the American experience (Omi & Winant, 1994, pp. 55, 5, emphasis in original).3

This issue is a challenging truth for spiritual caregivers4 and other helping professionals, because it confronts us with the task of becoming culturally competent and designing our caring interventions to fit the needs of the people who seek our help—in all of their particularity—rather than simply assuming that our clinical competence is essentially “one size fits all” (cf. Sue & Sue, 2003). Meeting this task has been a fruitful one, evidenced by the proliferation in recent years of pastoral care and counseling books and articles that address the concerns of various racial populations (e.g., Augsburger, 1986; Clark, 2002; Davis & Tarango, 2000; Wimberly, 1991). Such efforts are laudable.

However, even with the greater attentiveness that ministers and other spiritual caregivers give to racial issues, there is a dimension that, to my knowledge, is not addressed in much depth: the needs and concerns of mixed-race persons in

3This statement, in turn, is simply a modernization of W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous declaration that “The problem of the twentieth century [and of the 21st as well] is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (from The Souls of Black Folk [1903], in Huggins, 1986, p. 372).

4When referring to individuals who are providing care, I use the term “spiritual caregivers” to be more inclusive, as the term “pastoral” carries connotations of being Christian and clergy-centered that may sound exclusive to many religious practitioners. When referring to the disciplinary field, I utilize the terms “pastoral care” or “pastoral care and counseling,” since most of the research I cite derives from authors who identify as Christians (including me), and those terms reflect how the discipline has been commonly defined.