

# “What Color Is Your God?”

A Sermon delivered by Reverend Marlin Lavanhar  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, February 8, 2009

In America it is Black History Month. It has always seemed strange to me that we would segregate our history. We have had segregated schools, segregated transportation and accommodations. We have had segregated churches. But why would we segregate history?

One reason is that Black History Month could be considered “the march on Selma” for education. It is the non-violent protest that will not stop until all history, black history and white history, Native American, Asian American and Hispanic American history, Jewish, Christian and Islamic history become one story. The true story of America.

Before I delve into my main topic this morning I want to give a brief description of how Black History Month came about. Its origins just might help us learn something that could change our outlook on religion. It was started in 1926, by Carter Godwin Woodson, as Negro History Week. He chose February because both Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln were born in this month. Carter G. Woodson was born just after the Civil War, in 1875, the son of slaves. He started high school at the age of *twenty*. He went on to earn degrees from the University of Chicago, the Sorbonne in France, and his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1912.

Woodson became a scholar and publisher of black history, because he believed that once people became aware of the significant contributions of black Americans, American history would be rewritten. In 1926 when he established Negro History Week, most people – black and white – had no idea about the major contributions of African Americans to the development of our country. As a result, Woodson believed blacks were seen as a “child-like race.” He was convinced that once Americans were educated about the tremendous role of African Americans in shaping America that prejudices would be broken down and appreciation and respect for black people would rise up.

More than 80 years later, however, Woodson would be disappointed to know that of the hundreds of black men and women who produced so many substantial inventions (from the development of crop rotation, the traffic light, the mail box, gas masks, the fountain pen, the typewriter, the telegraph, the golf tee, the automatic gear shift, the commode toilet – to the method of dry cleaning clothes, the electric lamp, the automatic car coupler and the air brake for the railroad) all of which have greatly benefited this country, yet only four black inventors have been inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in Akron, Ohio.<sup>i</sup> (I learned this weekend that over the last few years the Patent and Trademark Office has been working closely with the

National Inventors Hall of Fame Foundation to rectify this situation and honor the true story of Black History.)<sup>ii</sup>

So, Negro History *Week* has expanded into Black History *Month*. But we will know that we have finally crossed the Jordan River leading from the dry desert of discrimination to a new land – flowing with the honey of truth and justice, when black history becomes a part of American history *all year long*.

What is amazing my friends, is that not only have we been to the mountain top, we can see that promised land just ahead. Many people view the election of Barrack Obama as a sign that finally American history, both black and white, have converged. In that sense, we are living black history; we are finally witnessing the united state of America. This is a great time to be alive, because we are not just witnessing history, we are making history. We are not just dreaming about changing the world, we are changing the world.

Now, we are in church today. So it is important for us to remember that the history of American religion has also spent many years wandering in that same desert of division and discrimination. Churches and the Bible have both been used to reinforce ideas of racism and white supremacy.

It brings to mind an old story about a man walking across a bridge one day, when he saw another man standing on the guardrail looking like he might jump off. The first man cried out, "Don't jump! Please! Life is worth living!"

"Huh, give me one good reason why life's worth living?" replied the other man.

"Well ... are you believer or an unbeliever?"

"I'm a believer."

"I am too!" said the first man. "Are you Jewish, Muslim or Christian?"

"Christian."

"I am too! Are you Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"I am too! Are you Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist or Church of God?"

"Church of God."

"Are you Church of God in Christ, Church of God of Prophecy, Church of God United or Church of God Sanctified?"

"The Church of God Sanctified."

"I am too!"

“Are you the Church of God Sanctified that uses the 1929 prayer book or the prayer book revised in 1971?”

“The 1971 prayer book.”

To which the man shouted, "Death to heretics!" and pushed the other man off the bridge.

Religion is too often a serious source of division rather than a sacred source of our union. And much of the division boils down to how the Bible is interpreted. Many people think of the Bible as a history book, when in fact, the Bible is not really one book, it is a library. It is made up of lots of books. The Bible includes books of poetry, history, mythology, laws, letters, proverbs, prayers, parables and more. There is history *in* the Bible, but to read the whole book as history is to misread it.

More importantly, whenever we read history we have to pay attention to who wrote that history. Just like when we talk about American history, we must remember it has traditionally been written by European American men, and so it has mostly contained the stories that such men considered important. For example, we have always honored the founding fathers, and have often overlooked the incredible contributions of our founding mothers. We have often highlighted stories like the Thanksgiving story of Europeans and Native Americans joining together peacefully to help one another survive in the new world. But we have downplayed the near genocide of the Native Americans as their lives and lands were taken from them. Now, every educated person in America knows this today. Yet our school history books do not always teach the whole story.

Here in Oklahoma, more than 85 years later, we are still trying to advocate for including the Tulsa 1921 Race Riot in the standard curriculum in our schools. Even so, some historians claim that there were only 38 deaths, while others claim there were over 300. A question that remains is, when it is finally taught, *whose version* will be taught? It reminds us that history itself is a form of interpretation, and of course it is usually written by the victors not the vanquished. So, keeping this understanding of history in our minds, let us look at the Bible to see what we might learn about how to read the scriptures intelligently.

Let's start with Noah. After the flood, we are told that Noah discovers the fruit of the vine. He plants the first vineyard and invents wine. He also becomes the first recorded person to get drunk. As we read in Genesis 9:20-24, Noah apparently passes out naked and we are told that his son Ham discovers him and looks upon his naked body. Ham tells the other two sons, who promptly cover up their father. For Ham's indiscretion, we are told that God curses Ham's son,

Canaan. Genesis 9:25-26 reads, “Cursed be Canaan, lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.”

We are only in the ninth chapter of the first book, and God has just ordained slavery. This Bible passage was frequently quoted by southern slaveholders in defense of slavery in America. And, for those who know their Bible, it is only the first of many examples in which the Bible (the old *and* new testament) tells us that God endorses slavery.

Those who have read their Bible know that God gave Moses more than ten commandments, right? Does anyone remember how many commandments God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai according to the Bible? There are 613 commandments in all! The commandments we usually talk about (and build statues of) are really just the “big ten.”

In Exodus 21:7 we are told God commands: *When a man sells his daughter as a slave...* (and God explains how a father should go about selling his daughter into slavery.) You might expect the commandment to read: *Fathers shall not sell their daughter's into slavery*, right? But that is not what the Bible says. And women, before you become too upset and throw away your Bibles, please note that in Exodus 21:2 God's commandment begins: *When you buy a male Hebrew slave...* (and it goes on to explain how God would have such slaves treated.) According to a literal reading of the Bible, God is all for slavery.

Now, the question you and I have to ask is: Which of these commandments were created by and for a group of desert nomads who lived 4000 or more years ago, and which are universal laws that transcend time and place and culture? If you agree that God did not and would not endorse the enslavement of a daughter by her own father – or any one person by another – then you are not a biblical literalist. Which means that you realize that the Bible is not the exact word of God.

There will be those whose instant reaction will be to say, “But that's the Old Testament, the New Testament is different.” However, that's only because they have not read the New Testament very closely. Slavery was a common practice in Jesus' time and Jesus never once spoke out against it. In fact, the apostle Paul spoke out *for* it. Paul is quite eloquent in his support for slavery. In Ephesians 6:5 he writes: *Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling...* (and this is only one example of Paul's many quotes that say the same thing.)

Now, someone's got to be wondering why Marlin has chosen Black History Month to use the Bible to make the case for slavery. I do so because I believe we must seek the truth and the truth shall set us free. I do so because I know that Jesus did not come to teach the Bible, Jesus

came to preach the good news. I also believe that the Bible contains that good news, but only if it is read intelligently. And a literal reading of the Bible is not intelligent, and is often destructive. And most people who claim to read it literally have never actually read it.

The beauty of the Bible is that it was also used by those who ended slavery. However, the anti-slavery Christians did not read the scriptures literally. Instead, they read the spirit of the Bible and made their case that even though the social laws of the Bible allow slavery, the moral law of the Bible is one of charity and love toward your neighbor. They argued that the moral law of the Bible (exemplified in the life of Jesus) supersedes the social laws. And that's why the Civil War (having been won by the north) may have done more to discredit Biblical fundamentalism than Darwin's theory of evolution ever could.

But I'm not finished. I want us to also look at the story of Abraham's sons. You may recall that at first Abraham's wife Sarah cannot have children, so she eventually compels him to have a child with his slave Hagar. History shows us that in fact that would be a fairly typical arrangement in those times. Long before this, God promised Abraham land and said:

*I will make of you a great nation;  
I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you;  
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen. 12 1-3)*

So, since Sarah can't give him offspring, Hagar does. Abraham's first born is Ishmael the son of Hagar. Then, as we read on in Genesis, God blesses Sarah's womb so that at the age of 90 she has a child with Abraham who is named Isaac. Sarah soon becomes jealous of Hagar and Ishmael, so she has Abraham banish them.

The Arabs are believed to be the descendants of Abraham through *Ishmael*, while the Jews are said to be the descendants of Abraham through *Isaac and Jacob*. Here is my point: God promises land and blessings *to Abraham's offspring*. If we read the Bible we come away thinking that God has given the land to the descendants of Isaac – *to the Jews*. But if we read the Koran, we come away thinking that the land was promised to the descendants of Abraham's first and eldest son Ishmael – *to the Arabs*. Should we be surprised that the Hebrew Scriptures were penned by Hebrews and the Koran was penned by an Arab? Each one tells the story in the way that best benefits themselves (from their own perspective.)

And so goes history. It is written by people, from their particular perspective. It is not the literal truth, but an interpretation of the truth.

And so goes scripture. It is not the literal teachings of God; it is written by people with a particular perspective about God. And therefore, it is not the exact and literal truth. Scripture is

an interpretation of the truth by those who wrote it. And just as American history needs to be updated to include the voices and achievements of African Americans and other minorities whose stories and experiences have been left out, our understanding of God and truth and scripture *also* need to be updated by listening to the voices and teachings and experiences of people of other religions who have their own distinct stories of encountering God. Because when we stick to one very particular story, and we do not make room for other stories, we end up following a partial truth. And thus, we end up wandering in the desert lost, instead of finding the Promised Land. And we end up denouncing other people's truths and experiences and cultural perspectives.

There are people who are white supremacists who believe that Europeans are a superior race and all others are in some ways inferior and backward. And these people are ignorant and dangerous and hopefully a dying breed. There are black supremacists as well, who hold the exact opposite view, and they are no less problematic. But in religion, we also have Christians who are Christian supremacists, thinking that their religion is superior, and that all other religions are inferior and in some ways backward. And there are Muslim supremacists, and Hindu-supremacists, Jewish supremacists and even atheist supremacists. It goes on and on and on. It comes from a basic lack of humility before the wonders of creation.

I read a fascinating book recently called *The Color of Water* about a black man named James McBride who was raised by a white mother. When he was a child, the only time James saw his mother cry was during church. She was the only white person in the church, so James assumed she was crying because maybe "...she wanted to be black like everyone else in church, because maybe God liked black people better." One afternoon on the way home from church [he] asked her whether God was black or white. She said:

*"Oh boy... God's not black. He's not white. He's a spirit."*

*"Does he like black or white people better?"*

*"He loves all people. He's a spirit."*

*"What's a spirit?"*

*"A spirit's a spirit."*

*"What color is God's spirit?"*

*"It doesn't have a color," she said. "God is the color of water." iii*

McBride says this was one of many answers his mom gave him while growing up that helped him overcome what he called "color confusion." And with this in mind I will close with the story that the children of this church are learning and discussing in our Sunday school this month.

*There was a Guru who asked his disciples how they could tell when the night had ended and the day begun. One said, "When you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a cow or a horse."  
"No," said the Guru.*

*Another said, "When you look at a tree in the distance and can tell if it is a neem tree or a mango tree."*

*"No," said the Guru.*

*"Well, then, what is it?" asked his disciples.*

*"When you look into the face of any man and recognize your brother in him; when you look into the face of any woman and recognize in her your sister. If you cannot do this, no matter what time it is by the sun, it is still night."<sup>iv</sup>*

My friends, today I come to share the good news. We are standing on the mountain top. From here we can see the Promised Land. I can see the Promised Land, where we will finally be able to lay down the burden of supremacy and take our rightful place in grace and glory. And then we'll all sing in our own language Hallelujah. Glory glory Hallelujah!

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/blkhistorymonth.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/blkhistorymonth/a/blkhistmonthnec.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> McBride, James. The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother, Riverhead Books Page: 51)

<sup>iv</sup> Anthony de Mello "Taking Flight: A Book of Story Meditations"