



Summer 2020

Dear listeners,

Back in June, one of our long-time subscribers sent us a question about MARS HILL AUDIO's editorial decisions: "Why have we not heard interviews on race relationships in our country?" It's a very good question, and I hope this is a good answer.

The short answer (or at least the shortest summary I can manage) is this: the current public strife about the significance of race is typically discussed within the very conceptual framework that has promoted (and will continue to intensify) social fragmentation, political hostility, and violence. It helps no one to present claims about the meaning of racial identity without recognizing how a radically secularized understanding of personhood and social order guarantees unresolvable antagonisms.

The heretofore uncommon word "systemic" has been heard a lot lately. Charges of systemic racism have been leveled in social and political settings. Attitudes of the living and the dead are judged to be vicious and unforgivable; institutions are guilty and must be demolished or (more moderately) reformed. But parties on all sides — whether they aim to tear down, rebuild, or defend — typically fail to ask if these systemic injustices (real or perceived) are more than moral and bureaucratic failures, if in fact they emerge from *a coordinated pattern of imagining, thinking, and acting* which inevitably encourages conflict and discord.

The present hostilities raise many questions about freedom and authority, two concepts centrally placed in the foundations of modernity. Modern definitions of freedom and authority rely on the claim that there is a *natural* division — that is, a division *in the nature of things* — between "sacred" and "secular." In public life, claims about the sacred can have no bearing on freedom or authority, which are "secular" (i.e., God-free) concerns. There is a *separate* space in which sacred beliefs, practices, and institutions are *permitted* to exist.

As a number of my guests have demonstrated in their books and in our conversations, this modern dualism relies on a distinctively modern definition of "religion." For example, on volume 134 of our *Journal*, I talked with theologian William Cavanaugh about his book *Field Hospital*. In that book, he writes:

[R]eligion is defined in liberal society as a matter of beliefs about the otherworldly and only indirectly applies to the social and political. In Thomas Jefferson's words, belief in one God or twenty neither picks my pocket nor breaks my legs; in other words, religion has no immediate social effect. . . . [T]he very modern Western concept of religion was born out of the desire to identify religion as precisely that which has to do with otherworldly concerns and not with the application of public power in "secular" matters such as politics and economics.

This constrictive concept of “religion” means that social and political problems such as racism — and even the question of *how to define and recognize* racism — cannot be examined in public in an explicitly Christian framework. The rules of liberal society mean that human suffering and social injustices may only be addressed with the vocabulary of “public reason,” which is regarded as *real* reason. *Real* reason, we are told, excludes references to transcendent realities. We can’t refer to the *Logos* who is the origin of reason or the Triune God who is the source of love and sociality — the very realities that *in truth* provide adequate grounds for pursuing justice and confronting racism. Nor may Christians question in public the worshipful exaltation of the will promoted by modern “freedom,” an idolatry that has brought us to a condition of *systemic nihilism* and its attendant curses.

Our judgments about the nature and significance of race and racial identity need to be correlated with good descriptions of other attributes of human experience, including the ends of our sociality and communal membership, the sources of political authority, and the true nature of freedom. What these things *really are* can only be explained in light of how God has made us and what God has done, is doing, and will do in human history. As Oliver O’Donovan pointed out in *The Desire of the Nations*, “we must look to the horizon of God’s redemptive purposes if we are to grasp the full meaning of political events that pass before our eyes.” On that horizon is the unification of all things *in Christ* (Eph. 1:9f.), a unity contradicted by all stoking of animosity and vengeance. But unity pursued *without Christ* is likewise a violation of God’s purposes. Before him alone, every knee shall bow.

Lessons about justice and human dignity that the Church presents to the world are only intelligible in light of the whole Christian message. Checking our theology at the door when we speak of matters of public significance — *silencing the claim that Christ is King* — may satisfy the segregational rules of liberalism, but then, O’Donovan warns, “the democratic ‘creed,’ not the Gospel, becomes the heart of the church’s message to the state.”

Many of the interviews on MARS HILL AUDIO are presented to encourage an understanding of cultural concerns in a more deeply Christian way. For a long time, American Christians have been content to think more or less as Christians about *private* matters, but (at best) as moralistic therapeutic Deists when thinking about public life. As O’Donovan has observed, the modern division between fully Christian theological reflection and politics has for many Christians become internalized. “Each of us has a mind partitioned by a frontier, and accepts responsibility for policing it.” We’re not merely *captive* to the systemic misunderstandings of modernity; we’re suffering from a kind of Stockholm Syndrome whereby we admire and serve the interests of our captors.

MARS HILL AUDIO’s mission involves the articulation of a paradigm shift (*metanoia*) with power to liberate us from various systemic confusions, including how we think and act concerning race. Acting wisely in the world demands discernment and courage, now as ever. Please consider supporting us as we support you and others in these challenging times.

Gratefully,



Ken Myers  
Host and Producer