

Un-creating race

A Lac La Ronge Band member asked me over coffee, "Why did God create the different races?" There are two assumptions in this question: first, that there is such a thing as race; and, second, that there is a reason why these races are different. These assumptions are dangerous because they are only a step away from something very real and hurtful: racism.

Medieval Christians believed that black Africans were descended from Cain and that they were made different as part of Cain's punishment for the murder of his brother. Thus slavery was viewed as part of their god's plan. As a child I learned a song that expressed a more modern anti-racist Christian view: "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight..." The problem with this view is that Redskins aren't really red and Oriental people aren't really yellow. Blacks are not black and Whites are not white. Everyone is some shade of brown. Further, no particular shade of brown is uniform for any so-called race. For example, some "whites" are darker than some "blacks."

Anthropologists made the last great attempt to define race scientifically some 20 years ago. They looked at a series of genetically heritable features such as skin colour, head shape, height, and blood type. They failed to find any single characteristic that was unique to any human community commonly thought of as a race. But on the basis of averages (for example, some groups of humans are generally darker than certain other groups of humans) they named three major races: Negroid, Caucasoid and Mongoloid; and three minor or smaller races – two from Africa plus one (aboriginal) from Australia. Indians from India were considered part of the Caucasian race based on similarities of facial characteristics and blood type distribution while people aboriginal to the American continents were classified as part of the Mongoloid race. With respect to skin colour, the Negroid race plus all three minor races are "Black" in popular North American usage.

The attempt to define race in a scientific way fell by the wayside because it went in a direction that offended our current biases about race. People who are racist objected to being lumped in with people they felt to be lesser in some ways; and "politically correct" people, who viewed themselves as anti-racist, thought that this kind of research somehow legitimized discrimination. I think the research showed something else entirely – that what is included or not in how we see "race" is arbitrary and has much to do with our cultural programming unless we choose to see things differently. In short, there was no god that created the races. We created the races, in our minds.

Assumptions that anyone is a certain way because we identify him or her with a particular race or because he identifies himself with a particular race are the basis of racism. By realizing that we are the creators of the races we are empowered to un-create them. We could decide that there is only one race and that is the human race. Personally, I like to think of us all as Metis.