

On Racism
by Lloyd Robertson

As a young child going to Sunday school I was taught that there were four races: red, yellow, black and white. There was even a little nursery song that went "red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight....."

As I got older I learned that the "reds" aren't really red; the "yellows" aren't really yellow; the "blacks" aren't really black; and, by gum, the "whites" aren't really white. You doubt this? Next time you are on La Ronge Avenue, try running up to a "white" with a sheet of foolscap. See if his or her face matches the color on that sheet of paper.

The amount of brownness in everyone's face is governed by the amount of melanin in their skin. The situation becomes even more confused when we add other features into the mix. There is no set of biological characteristics that belong exclusively to any one group of people. Individuals may differ in blood type, skull shape, hair texture, and skin shading; however no so-called "race" has demonstrated exclusive proprietorship over any such characteristics.

Anthropologists have done their best. Society directed them to find races and they have identified three major ones: Negroid, Caucasoid and Mongoloid. The trouble is that many "whites" (Caucasoids) are darker than many "blacks" (Negroids).

In my last column I reviewed the Ku Klux Klan in Saskatchewan. Their slogans for the 1929 election were "to stop the Roman Catholic conspiracy to conquer Canada" and to "stop Orientals from preying on white women". Both the discrimination based on religion and the discrimination based on what we think of as "race" were given equal weight.

In an earlier column I discussed the hatred two individuals had for Jews. Was this racism? Are the Jews even part of a larger "race"? Their physical characteristics vary depending on whether their ancestors spent the last thousand years in Europe, China or central Africa.

The past 50 years witnessed the invention of a total new "race". "Hispanics" view themselves to be victims of racism in the United States; yet, ancestrally, they are from Europe, they are of the same race as the so-called "whites". Yet this fledgling "race" is identifiable and in a state of disadvantage. Are they a race? No. Are they victims of racism? Yes.

"Race" is an illusion but "racism" is real. "Racism" implies a dynamic, a relationship between the racist and his or her victim. The illusion of race or "race consciousness" is, therefore, a necessary but insufficient condition to explain "racism". Included must be some kind of belief system that will govern action toward these "others". In short, racism is not a question for anthropology at all. It is a matter for psychology.

What is happening in the mind of the bigot? Well, there may be an economic motive. People in positions of power and wealth will want to keep their positions relative to other minorities. Racism is the ideology to keep those in a position of disadvantage "in their place".

Second bigotry often has to do with scapegoating. Sometimes things go wrong in our lives. Sometimes the world is unfair. Who can we blame? The Reform Party would blame immigrants. Mark Lepine blamed women who want equality. Fundamentalist Christians blame homosexuals. Hitler blamed Jews.

Finally, there exists a group of bigots who ply their bile without any apparent economic or scapegoating motive. Psychologically, they combine two characteristics. Fear is an operative word, they tend to be insecure. Second, they tend to have authoritarian personality types.

The authoritarian child grows up to take, and give, orders. He believes in good and evil; and if our side is good then the other side must be evil. A variation of this is that if our people are going to heaven then the other people must be going to hell. "These others" can be trusted only if they can be changed. Those that will not or cannot change deserve punishment.

We have, in Canada, a multicultural society. We must work to understand and, indeed, cherish the differences that make our society unique. We must weed out intolerance.