Diaspora Identities and Multi-Ethnic Churches

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Abstract

Racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse contexts create unique challenges for Christian diaspora peoples at the intersection of their ethnic and Christian identities. This article draws on previous research to describe a strategy available to ethnic minority Christians for navigating this tension in the context of multi-ethnic church communities (Parker, 2024). This strategy derives from a theological analysis of theories of race and ethnicity combined with a missional account of cohesion in racially and ethnically diverse churches.

Key Words: race, ethnicity, unity, cohesion, ecclesiology, multi-ethnic church, multi-cultural church

Introduction

The multi-directional and dynamic movement of peoples around the world is creating an ever-evolving and complex context in which Christians and Christian communities must embody their personal, ecclesial, and missional commitments. Challenges abound for local churches seeking to discern the shape faithfulness to those commitments should take amidst the diversity of the race-ethnic identities of the peoples inhabiting the social and geographic landscapes in which they exist. Likewise, challenges exist for diaspora communities seeking to navigate a tension between their personal race-ethnic identities and commitments to their Christian identities in new ethnically and culturally complex homes. Specifically, to what degree can and should minority diaspora communities hold onto their race-ethnic identities amidst hyper-diverse contexts or alongside majority cultures?

One solution to these challenges is the establishment of mono-cultural churches composed of minority cultures living side-by-side one another and majority culture churches in these diverse contexts. Diaspora churches often exist in varying degrees of cooperation with various other churches in their communities, and these diaspora churches face unique challenges resulting from this approach to navigating their race-ethnic and Christian identities. An alternative solution is the creation of multi-ethnic churches, who also face unique challenges. The emergence of diaspora churches raises relevant and interesting ecclesiological and missiological questions, questions that will not be taken up in this brief article. This article will focus on multi-ethnic churches and the promise they hold for navigating the challenge of diaspora identity and lived Christian faithfulness in globalized contexts.

Race and Ethnicity Are Social Constructs

A Brief History of Race and Ethnicity

Societies throughout the world are shaped significantly by race-ethnic diversity, sometimes in ways that lead to cohesive communities and often in ways that lead to social fracture and instability. Despite their prevalence and social power, race and ethnicity are frequently misunderstood on a conceptual level. What is race? What is ethnicity? Misconceptions about what race and ethnicity are can lead to faulty assumptions about who "we" and "they" are, and how

"we" are different from "them." These faulty assumptions can impair efforts to foster cohesion amidst race-ethnic difference. Accordingly, it is helpful to describe how and why race and ethnicity exist in the world when attempting to develop social and ecclesial responses to the fracture that often exists in communities around race-ethnic diversity.

Race and ethnicity have related yet distinct conceptual histories (Parker, 2024, pp. 31-82). Those histories converged in the twentieth century as both came to be regarded by social scientists as social constructions. That is, the social significance of race-ethnic identities (Parker, 2024, p. 2) derives from dynamic relationships between groups as social actors distinguish themselves from one another, assigning meaning to differences ranging from phenotype to language and culture, creating "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991).

Race, Ethnicity, and Boundary Maintenance

"Actors" is an apt descriptor, for the dynamic relationships that lead to the social construction of race and ethnicity take the form of embodied social narratives that are continuously negotiated and subject to mediated changes. Groups live into stories of kinship and connections, stories about the differences of the "Other," and they enact concrete rhythms in their lives that materialize the difference. For instance: "We" shop here, and "they" shop there. "We" eat this, and "they" eat that.

These material differences are real, but race and ethnicity come to exist and endure because of the significance attributed to them, as society organizes itself around difference. Indeed, the material factors may change over time. However, where the race-ethnic actors continue to acknowledge social boundaries, the racial and ethnic groups persist. What is most important for the continuance of race and ethnicity is that members of race-ethnic groups maintain and perform the implicit and explicit narrative boundaries in a given social context (Barth, 1998, p. 16).

Race, Ethnicity, and Diaspora Communities

This race-ethnic process is important for diaspora communities. With the increasing movement of peoples around the world, racial and ethnic identities are increasingly constructed in an interflow of competing and changing dynamics. While a previous generation of scholars predicted that globalization would lead to the assimilation, or "melting," of racial and ethnic identities, this has largely proven not to be the case (Parker, 2024, pp. 40-45). However, while race-ethnic boundaries frequently persist in today's globalizing world, the boundaries are increasingly complex.

Ethnic boundaries, even for minority groups in globalized spaces, can endure, and even be strengthened. A "group's culture, as well as forms of social organization, may change without removing the ethnic boundary," provided the communities in a given context maintain the embodied narratives of difference (Erikson, 2010, p. 45). However, these changes will frequently result in hybrid identities in the interplay of new contexts and transnational relationships for diaspora communities (Werbner, 1997). Indeed, as Schreiter writes, "When cultures come into contact, they constantly borrow and reconfigure themselves through new knowledge and practices" (Schreiter, 2011, p. 31), resulting in changes to both host culture and diaspora culture identities, without forcing the eradication of either.

The Embodied Context of Lived Christian Faithfulness

Race-ethnic identities are complex social processes, especially for diaspora communities. Complexities for these communities do not stop with the dynamic negotiation of racial and ethnic

identities over time and across geographic spaces. There is an important and dynamic relationship that exists specifically for *Christian* race-ethnic communities. Namely, Christian identity, Christian community, and Christian practice all exist within racially and ethnically situated lives.

James K. A. Smith argues persuasively that all forms of socially constructed identities entail "liturgical" or "religious" processes (Smith, 2009). Drawing on an anthropology grounded in the Augustinian tradition, Smith describes human persons as fundamentally "lovers." That is, the narrative and embodied structures of socially constructed identities, like race and ethnicity, will always be related to what a community construes as good and worthy of affection and devotion. As a result, race-ethnic imaginations produce performances with specific race-ethnic, identity-affected visions of good, and these performances manifest in morally dense patterns. The construction of race-ethnic identities impacts in specific ways desire and moral character, frequently resulting in patterns of "counter-discipleship" for Christians.

Race-ethnic Counter-discipleship

The relationship between identity and desire creates a tension for Christian communities when race-ethnic group commitments are at odds with faithful Christian commitments. Two fundamental aspects of a person's identity—their race-ethnic identity and their Christian identity—are brought into conflict. The scriptural language for this tension is found in Paul's appeal to the Christians in Rome: "Do not be conformed to this world…" (English Standard Version, 2001, Romans 12:2). There are patterns embedded in the construction of race-ethnic identities that act as modes of counter-discipleship to lived faithful Christianity (Parker, 2024, pp. 94-95).

Racism and the Subversion of Lived Christian Faithfulness

An example of this race-ethnic counter-discipleship that looms large over the history of the whole of today's world is the relationship of Western Christianity to modern racism. History demonstrates that there is a calamitous relationship between the Church and the development of systemic racism in the West, where "the modern racializing of bodies" derives from the ways in which "Christian identity was reimagined…" as Western and "White" (Carter, 2008, p. 372). The racism that has resulted from Western history's construction of racial identities within the context of its own Christian identity has functioned as an acute and destructive influence both inside and outside the Church.

For instance, Mark Noll has described the nineteenth-century Civil War of the United States as a theological crisis (Noll, 2006). Religion, for the white Protestant majority of the antebellum U.S. population, was "more important than any other center of value at work in the country" (Noll, 2006, pp. 11-14). Nonetheless, in a complex and contorted relationship between white identity and Christianity, many of these white Christians elevated their racial commitments over their Christian ones. This misplaced identity resulted in the creation of a racialized social system intricately bound together with Christianity. It was a system in which white Christians too often chose, as Jemar Tisby puts it, "compromise" over "courageous Christianity" (Tisby, 2019), subverting lived Christian faithfulness to the demands associated with their racialized identities in ways that continue to dramatically impact the social, political, and religious landscape of the United States (Emerson and Bracey, 2024).

Multi-ethnic Churches as Spaces of Redemption

Willie James Jennings writes, "There is within Christianity a breathtakingly powerful way to imagine and enact the social, to imagine and enact connection and belonging" (Jennings, 2010, p. 4). A true account of the story that Christianity announces to the world is one of welcome, belonging, and unity. Although Jennings notes that history exposes too often "a distorted relational imagination" which has compelled the opposite along race-ethnic lines (Jennings, 2010, p. 4), he also sees local churches as uniquely situated to generate productive theological responses to the problem of racial and ethnic division. Local churches are spaces ripe with prophetic and missional potential, where anti-racist or unifying theological ideas can meet and confront context specific race-ethnic narratives that are at odds with lived Christian faithfulness, especially narratives that promote racism or disunity among race-ethnic actors inside and outside of the congregation.

In particular, multi-ethnic churches have unique potential for confronting the challenges associated with racial and ethnic difference in specific contexts. While it is true that racial and ethnic identities exist through patterns that are sometimes at odds with lived Christian faithfulness, race-ethnic identities can also highlight important aspects of faithful Christianity. For instance, cultures that are more inclined towards embodied welcoming of strangers, when intersected with a Christian vision of welcome, can instruct, through their culturally embedded Christian expression, cultures that prioritize privacy and individualism. Likewise, those cultures that are more inclined towards a preference for individualism can shine light on other aspects of lived Christian faithfulness through their own culturally embedded Christian expressions. When these differences are united in multi-ethnic Christian communities, concrete expressions of missional and prophetic witness are possible.

Dynamics of Power

Before exploring how diverse race-ethnic communities can pursue this prophetic and missional potential, a caution is necessary. A pernicious challenge that results at the intersection of race-ethnic difference is the misuse of power in relationships across racial and ethnic lines, especially amidst the residue of Western racism and imperialism. This challenge, because of its relationship to race-ethnic narratives and their attendant embodied practices, can often remain hidden, operating below the consciousness of race-ethnic actors, and it can impact the life of a church community.

Elaine Robinson warns of the "danger of paternalism and even neocolonialism in forms of 'inclusion'..." when majority cultures, particularly in Western contexts, invite race-ethnic difference into their churches (Robinson, 2012, p. 92). Reggie Williams, who suggests that "the cure to the problem of a diseased Christian imagination…is empathetic, incarnational action on behalf of…marginalized people (Williams, 2014, p. 140), too, warns that an embrace of the Other "must include awareness of its potential abuses" (Williams, 2014, p. 3). A faithful Christian emphasis on joining in concrete spaces must keep in mind the conditions which frame the structure of that joining in terms of power.

Mutuality and Self-giving

Churches can bear witness against the concrete realities of race-ethnic disunity and injustice in the communities in which they are embedded. Those who do so from positions of power must exercise much caution. Nonetheless, they need not let fear of power dynamics forestall the work towards the healthy joining of diverse groups of people as a missional and prophetic community. Instead,

the church must work hard to foster a shared culture of mutuality and self-giving, with those in positions of power being the first to give up cultural preferences and open themselves to change.

Race-ethnic identities, especially in globalized contexts, are already in the midst of change. As described above, this change belongs to the very nature of race-ethnic identity. Change can happen without race-ethnic identities being erased. The fear of "losing one's culture" often animates anxiety and its attendant social animosity and fracture amidst race-ethnic diversity. This frequent development is true for both host cultures and diaspora communities. However, under the conditions of mutuality and self-giving, when infused with gospel-centered narratives of unity and embrace, race-ethnic difference can be preserved while bringing about mutual edification for everyone in living amidst the community's united difference. That is, new embodied rhythms of concrete Christian faithfulness can emerge which allow for difference to exist and at the same time manifest prophetic and missional expressions of edification, unity, and cohesion.

How It Can Work

This study now leads to its primary question: How? In concrete terms, how can multi-ethnic churches navigate race-ethnic difference in ways that prevent injustice and misuses of power while fostering faithful missional and prophetic witness to the onlooking world, a world for whom fracture along race-ethnic lines is normal? There are at least three steps that are particularly helpful.

Embrace the Truth that Christians Are "Mulatto"

Christian communities must develop an adequate theological account of identity, especially Christian identity. For instance, Brian Bantum has described Christian identity as "mulatto" (Bantum, 2010). In so doing, he attempts to subvert the historically troubled term "mulatto" which referred to mixed-race persons during and in the aftermath of colonialism and slavery in the Americas. For Bantum, Christians are "mulatto" in the sense that their former identities are necessarily upended and changed through their joining to Christ and indwelling by the Spirit. This joining does not erase their previous identity, nor does it make them co-equal or equivalent to God. Instead, something new occurs as "mulatto" Christians" receive in the Spirit a new aspect of their lived identities that points beyond old patterns of being. This new aspect entails being conjoined to the body of Christ and His community of faith from within the context of their race-ethnic selves.

To name the Christian as mulatto is to claim that Christians, through their union with Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, can and should embody patterns of existence that are not *constrained* by race-ethnic logics. Whereas race-ethnic logics exist under conditions of "we" are not "them," mulatto Christian identity insists that "we" are united with "them" in Christ. The Christian is the one who is no longer simply who he or she was before Christ; he or she is bound to Christ and bound to others, others who are often "other." This binding has become a real aspect of their new person without destroying their old person. Hybridity is no longer a sociological fact; it is a theological one. And this theological account of identity creates the expectation that racially and ethnically situated persons can hold onto those identities safely while opening themselves to deep connections, relationships, and modes of embodied existence with the "other." A concrete effort to foster race-ethnic unity, for Christian communities, begins with embracing a theology of the person that explicitly recognizes the urgency of unity across lines and in the midst of race-ethnic difference for Christian persons.

Identify the Operative Narratives

With a sufficient theological account of identity in place, churches can better identify and understand the specific race-ethnic narratives operative in their community. Every person in a congregation will have a specific sense of self that will have been formed through race-ethnic embodied narratives. The specific narratives and attendant practices will vary from context to context. However, all race-ethnic actors in a church are necessarily negotiating their own identity in relation to the Christian community of the church.

These race-ethnic identities will exist on a continuum in terms of commitments to those race-ethnic identities, and they will all be hybrid and contingent to one degree or another. Wherever specific people land on the continuum of commitment to a particular race-ethnic identity, those specific race-ethnic narratives of understanding and identity for individual race-ethnic persons will have been fashioned from social narratives that they will have encountered throughout their personal history. The narratives against which their personal stories of identity will have been shaped will exist in tension, especially to their concomitant Christian identity, as those stories have encountered race-ethnic fracture, injustice, violence, and the like. A "mulatto" (or similar) theological account of identity creates a safe space in which congregations can have honest conversations about the ways their pursuits of lived Christian faithfulness are impacted by their race-ethnic commitments. By identifying those specific embodied narratives, the community can clearly identify the ways that edification, mutuality, and self-giving can take specific shapes within the Christian community.

Race-ethnic actors will have uniquely negotiated identities between their race-ethnic selves and their Christian commitments. Likewise, the church will have its own cultural shape. It will similarly have been shaped by its rooted history in a specific context and the histories of its participants. Moreover, the church community will reflect the story of its relationship to the society in which it is embedded, sometimes through embrace, sometimes through prophetic protest, and often unconsciously. The embrace and the protest can flow in multiple directions which, in some ways will likely reflect desired Christian values and commitments, and in other ways will run counter to desired Christian values and commitments. Because narratives often simply "are," because they do not derive from intentionality and exist unconsciously, each specific church will be required to reckon with and describe its own narrative, including its unconscious assumptions, before a praxis of cohesion tethered to intentional embodied narratives of cohesion can be formed. Such growth requires a sort of spiritual ethnography. This need not be a complicated process, but it does require intentionality.

Script an Embodied Narrative of Cohesion

A spiritual ethnography can be led by someone with experience in qualitative research methods. A spiritual ethnography, simply stated, is a process whereby members of the church are guided to describe the relationship of their race-ethnic identities and their Christian identities as well as the culture of the church itself. Culturally preferred Christian practices can be identified along with the stories those practices reveal about who people are and how they understand lived Christian faithfulness: how to pray, how to express devotion, how to care for one another, how to show welcome, etc. An example of such a process can be found in *Embodied Cohesion: A Framework for Fostering Race-Ethnic Cohesion in Local Churches* (Parker, 2024).

This spiritual-ethnographic process of identifying and describing a church's own identity allows for both an evaluation of that corporate identity—noticing unconscious or unstated narratives that contort faithful expressions of lived Christianity—and for a reconfiguring of that identity based on the diversity of its community—a reconfiguring tethered to the promise of unity amidst its diversity.

To avoid unjust abuses of power, churches must pay special attention to allow for race-ethnic identities, especially for minority and diaspora communities, to persist. That persistence can take place with the understanding that these identities are malleable, contingent, and hybrid. The identities can and will evolve in relation to the Christian community, while at the same time, they may remain as essential for many members of the community. Indeed, when a specific member of the church brings their own history and person into the community, they bring resources attendant with those histories and person-specific stories which can be of value to the life of the church community and its equally contingent hybridity. Indeed, God's Spirit works through this melding of unity that resists conformity to accomplish God's own missional purposes in and through the community in those specific local places.

Once a robust understanding of the embodied culture of the congregation and the relationship of the various members of the congregation to it exists, the church will have the resources necessary to then work together to forge a new shared culture that is shaped under conditions of edification, mutuality, and self-giving. Cultural preferences can be shared. New shared meanings can be forged in an ongoing process of giving and receiving.

Conclusion

Read theologically, race and ethnicity feature prominently in a biblical theological account of human history. Mankind's story, according to the total biblical account, unfolds as unity and fracture in the book of Genesis, followed by restored unity in John's book, Revelation. However, and importantly, the story of restored unity is one in which difference is preserved. Difference exists, but it no longer exists as fracture. Instead, it exists as an integrated whole, one people of God in Christ from every tribe, nation, and tongue.

While humanity must wait for that glorious future to be fully revealed, a foretaste can exist amidst the fracture and brokenness of the world's present postlapsarian state, especially in contexts that experience dynamic movements of diaspora communities. That foretaste becomes especially visible, with missional and prophetic promise, in multi-ethnic churches. The development of cohesive multi-ethnic churches is not easy, but the Spirit of the living God, a Spirit of unity and reconciliation, can work to bring this about when churches give themselves intentionality to this pursuit. They need the Spirit's leading and a plan, or framework.

A framework for pursuing race-ethnic cohesion in local churches should include:

1. A process of clarifying the specific narratives that are animated in the church in relation to identity and belonging,
2. An integrated process of identifying the specific practices that embody the narratives,
3. An evaluation of those narratives and practices with respect to the values which the church desires to see shape renewed narratives which foster or strengthen cohesion, paying close attention to
   a. the specific dynamics of power difference that are operative, and

    b. creating a context in which race-ethnic identities can persist amidst a new, hybrid, shared cultural identity within the community, and

4. Finally, a commitment to developing the narrative-shaped culture that is desired through specific embodied practices (Parker, 2024, pp. 233-234).

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