
Abstract

The REA’s 1969 National Convention chose as its theme, “Our Divided Society—A Challenge to Religious Education,” addressing among other topics, issues of race and racism. Previously, the REA presented a mixed legacy in addressing racial injustice, remaining largely silent on such issues during the Civil Rights Era of the 1950’s and 1960’s, unlike the National Council of Churches which had taken a prophetic stance early on. Thus, the 1969 convention’s theme opened-up brave new spaces for the REA to address issues of race and racism in American society.

Introduction

In 1969, just one year after the assassination of civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Cone published Black Theology and Black Power which made the argument that liberation is at the heart of the Gospel and that “blackness is the primary mode of God’s presence,” revealed through the history of an oppressed people who offer a counternarrative to the dominant story of white normativity in American religiosity (1969). That same year, the Religious Education Association chose at its theme for its National Convention in Chicago: “Our Divided Society—A Challenge to Religious Education.” Among the divisions that the convention sought to address were issues of race and racism in American society, alongside the generation gap, poverty, and “American Military-Economic Power versus Vietnam.” The theme, which REA’s General Secretary Herman Wornom originally proposed as “Religious Education—A Unifying Force in a Divided Society,” struck a hopeful tone for the transformative power of religious education to work toward healing societal divisions. As the pre-conference issue of Religious Education observes:

Our society is divided into conflicting groups—black and white, poor and affluent, the "now" and the "other" generations, the have and have-not nations, etc. Sometimes these groups ignore one another; increasingly they become polarized in confrontation and conflict, sometimes violent, their relations distorted by hate and prejudice. . . Religious education, by influencing the social understanding and attitudes of children and youth, may play a significant role in healing divisions. Conflicting groups may be brought together as part of the religious education process (Wornom 1969, 162).

Yet, despite its hopeful tone, the convention itself offered a challenging message to religious educators concerning issues of race and racism in American religious experience. To be sure, the REA began as an all-white, male-led, predominantly Protestant organization in 1903. By the time of the 1969 convention the REA’s complexion had changed and included more previously underrepresented groups, mostly Jews and Catholics, thanks in large part to Wornom’s efforts. However, the association was still largely white and no African-Americans occupied major positions of leadership within the organization. More pointedly, unlike the National Council of Churches which took a leading role in Civil Rights issues in the 1950’s and 1960’s, the REA remained largely silent on issues of racial injustice, devoting only one issue of the journal to the topic in a twenty-year span. Therefore, as Stephen Schmidt observes, the 1969 Convention shook the foundations of the REA (1983, 181). Several key figures in the Civil Rights Movement addressed the convention, including Alvin Pitcher, National Urban League President Whitney Young, and minister and civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, whose talk, “Christianity, The Church, and
Racism,” excoriated the complicity of mainline American churches in perpetuating racial inequality (1970, 98). On the one hand, the 1969 convention was the largest and most inclusive convention the REA had ever held with over 1,500 in attendance representing various religious traditions. On the other hand, as Schmidt notes, it “served as a public judgmental word to the association,” highlighting its failures to address key social issues, especially issues of race (1983, 186).

This paper analyzes the treatment of the topics of race and racism at the REA’s 1969 National Convention. It seeks to contextualize those discussions in the broader trajectory of the REA’s own history and to locate the convention within the wider currents of American life and thought in the late 1960’s. And, it explores the convention’s legacy in opening-up brave spaces in the REA for meaningful conversations about race and racism in our society today. Utilizing a historical methodology, this research draws on archival material from the REA Archives at the Yale University Divinity School Library as well as material from the historical archives of the journal Religious Education. The paper examines 1969 convention themes concerning race through an analysis of primary source materials, including planning committee reports, convention and symposia programs, and convention speeches and papers. It also explores the treatment of race and racism in the REA’s official journal in the two decades prior to and after the 1969 convention. Overall, this research seeks to uncover clues from the past that might offer lessons for the present, recognizing that the REA’s choice of a convention theme almost fifty years ago is as timely today as it was then.

**REA and Race**

In a letter dated November 13, 1897, six years before he founded the REA, William Rainey Harper, wrote a response to Booker T. Washington who had requested help with a project for educating impoverished African-American children in the Jim Crowe South (Harper Papers, Box 3, Folder 19). Two years earlier, Washington received national attention as a prominent African-American leader when he gave a speech at the Atlanta Exposition of 1895 arguing for the progress of African-Americans through education rather than directly challenging Jim Crowe laws. As President of the University of Chicago, Harper was one of the most influential educational leaders in the country, who counted among his acquaintances President William McKinley and future president Theodore Roosevelt (See Harper Papers). In response to Washington’s request Harper simply replied that “I wish very much indeed that I could help you. The difficulty is that I find myself in the same condition with yourself; hundreds of boys and girls to help and very little with which to do it. We have a very heavy work of this kind and I am compelled to limit my energies in this direction to the work at home,” in other words, Chicago (Harper Papers, Box 3, Folder 19). To be sure, Harper was, in fact, very involved in the work of educating immigrant children and families in Chicago, having taken a special interest in Jane Adams’ Hull House, which the University of Chicago sponsored. Yet, Harpers’ energies, were, in reality, more vast and far reaching than he appeared to indicate in his letter to Washington, energies that would soon be directed to the founding of the REA as a national organization. That is not to suggest that Harper, in any way held racist views, of which there is no evidence; but rather, it does suggest that Harper was largely unconcerned about or, at best, indifferent to questions of racial injustice in American society at a time when the lynching of African-Americans was at its peak in the Jim Crowe South. Harper’s apparent attitude of indifference toward issues of race and racial injustice appears to also have been reflected in
his founding vision for the REA, which while not intentionally excluding African-Americans from the REA, he did not seek to include representatives of black churches (See REA Archives, Box 1, File 12).

**Planning for the 1969 Convention**

Herman Wornom proposed that “Our society is divided into conflicting groups —black and white, poor and affluent, the "now" and the "other" generations, the have and have-not nations, etc. Sometimes these groups ignore one another; increasingly they become polarized in confrontation and conflict, sometimes violent, their relations distorted by hate and prejudice. The brotherhood of mankind is denied or held to be Utopian. In contrast, Christianity, Judaism and other great religions have believed in the unity of mankind and have preached good will and brotherhood. Denominations which have been in conflict are now working for unity. Religions that differ in doctrine are cooperating in social action for human welfare. Religious education, by influencing the social understanding and attitudes of children and youth, may play a significant role in healing divisions. Conflicting groups may be brought together as part of the religious education process. R.E.A.'s convention will explore the potential of religious education to deal with social divisions and to play a unifying role. The five assemblies of the convention can deal with only a few of the major social divisions. A wider range of problems will be covered in the 20 or more workshops and seminars. The assembly themes will be: Our Divided Society—Black versus White, Youth Culture and the Generation Gap, American Military-Economic Power versus Vietnam, Korea and other nations, Religious Learning through Involvement in Social Conflict and Service, Model Programs for Religious Education in a Divided Society, Living and Teaching the Brotherhood of Man” (1968).

**1969 Convention**

In his address to the convention, “Christianity, the Church, and Racism,” Jesse Jackson argued, “The black community demands reparations. We are not asking for reverse racism or reverse discrimination. Compensation, though, is the answer to discrimination, and compensation is a very positive term. There is no need in saying you or your generation is not guilty because you have not discriminated against anybody. For you live off the prerogatives of those who did discriminate and exploit, and if you have inherited their comfortable state of living, if you have inherited the plantation and yet now you no longer run the plantation, you're just as guilty, just as wrong as the one who owned it. However, is the capacity to cut off our supply the adversary's need? We relate to God and bow to him because he's power. If God didn't have power, we would disregard him. It is precisely because God is the maker and the giver of every good and perfect gift and the Creator and the sustainer, the one who made the valleys and made the mountains and made all of the resources and who controls them and who can apply justice and who can grant mercy or grant grace” (1970). He further argued “The white church with all of its theology and its great seminaries and great religious education programs and great Sunday school buildings and gymnasiums on the corners cannot really say that it has majored either in hope or fulfillment. It has, by and large, been the sanctuary for America's economic status quo who could get some pablum from the preacher and some justification to continue their scheming. For, by and large, there has been very little demand put upon the one who joined the Christian church. Actually the American flag flies higher than the Christian cross in the bulk of our churches, and our commitment is greater to the nation than to the Christ. So we stand at attention in the face of the flag and seldom bow or pick up that cross. Often we put it around our necks but never really around our backs for Christ's sake. And you can call it fundamentalist if you want to but fundamentally if you are a Christian you must
give your allegiance to Christ. You can cut it any way you want” (1970). He concluded his talk with “We have a moral mandate to resist evil, as strong as the mandate to cooperate with the good. And we will become powerful enough through organization to have the Christian young men of the nation to resist war and the ministers to declare it evil. Then the presidents would have no choice but to study war no more” (1970).

Whitney Young Jr, president of the Urban League, whose book Beyond Racism was published the same year as his talk at the REA argued “For over half a century, a succession of great Black leaders has led a crescendo of voices calling for the emancipation of their people from their position of servitude and degradation. An increasing number of whites has joined them in their struggle” (1970). He went on to say “The Civil Rights movement has resulted in some notable advances in the recognition and definition of Black rights in the areas of freedom and equality with other Americans. The Supreme Court, in a series of school segregation cases, 1953 to 1955, established the principle that state-imposed segregation is unconstitutional under the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court held that separate schools are inherently inferior and ruled that the schools must be desegregated "with all deliberate speed." The Civil Rights Act of 1957 established a nonpartisan Civil Rights Commission, empowered to gather evidence on voting violations, and authorized the Justice Department to initiate action to counter irregularities in federal elections. The Act of 1964 was structured to insure maximum rights for Blacks in many areas of public life: voting, public accommodations, public facilities, education, and fair employment practices. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 provided for the assignment of federal examiners to observe voting in states or counties where patterns of discrimination existed. Thus, at long last, the rights of Blacks as full citizens seemed to have firm foundations in statutory and judicial provisions, however, the efforts on the part of the Department of Justice to change some of these provisions are disturbing to the Black community” (1970).

Rosemary Radford Ruether in her address “Black Theology and Black Church” argued “The church is usually the johnny-comelately to social movements, and so it is not surprising that the black church and the black seminary would be late and ambivalent in responding to the cry of "black power" and relating themselves to this movement. Yet, in another sense, the black church itself is the earliest institution of black power. In the days of slavery and through the dark period of reaction after Reconstruction, the black church was the one institution owned and run by the black community. Black autonomy was pioneered by the black church when it broke from white Christianity to form autonomous churches and denominations. The church building was often the only building owned by the black community independently, and so it naturally became the center of the social and political life as well. In Mississippi, when I was there in the summer of 1965, almost all the Head Start programs sponsored by the independent Child Development Group of Mississippi were in black churches. It was in black churches that the rallies and meetings were held, and from black churches that the demonstrators marched out to confrontations in the streets and court houses, singing the "soul" anthems of black Christianity. When Stokely Carmichael proudly boasts that the black community is the only place in America where people greet each other as "brother" and "sister," he is pointing to a heritage of black Christianity derived from the communitarian tradition of the Radical Reformation” (1970). She further argued, "In what sense is a black theology a possible form of theology as a whole? How does one combat the ready cry that such an idea must necessarily be the reverse form of a racist theology that has all too long been practiced in the white churches to assure their members that the separation and superiority of the white race over the black race is "in the Bible" and expresses the "will of God"? Is black theology just a new form of racial
propaganda, making Christ in the image of black exclusivism, as the Caucasians made Christ in the image of white exclusivism?” (1970). She added, “The oppressor is also dehumanized by the false relationship, for he receives no true human communication in the oppressive relationship, but receives back only a mask donned by the oppressed to reflect the demands of the oppressor. So the act of rebellion is also a breaking of silence between man and man, and the initiation of true communication for the first time, based on two fully autonomous human selfhoods that can stand as "I" and "Thou" for each other” (1970). She concludes, quoting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “I have a dream that one day men will rise up and come to see that they are made to live together as brothers. I still have a dream this morning that one day every Negro in this country, every colored person in the world, will be judged by the content of his character rather than the color of his skin. I still have a dream today that one day the idle industries of Appalachia will be revitalized and the empty stomachs of Mississippi will be filled, and brotherhood will be more than a few words at the end of a prayer, but rather the first order of business on every legislative agenda.... I still have a dream today that one day every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill will be made low, the rough places will be made smooth and the crooked places straight, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together” (1970).

Educationally, in a panel to counter racism, the argument was made “For over 100 years the frame of reference in the American race problem has been the inferiority of the Black man. During slavery he was defined as essentially inferior, after slavery accidentally inferior. Americans in viewing the race issue as a Black problem, focused the spotlight on the man with the arrow in his chest. With the advent of Black Power, the victim began to say, "I will heal myself! Concerned white Americans, go talk to the Bowman." Both Reverend Jesse Jackson and Dr. Alvin Pitcher in their keynote addresses to the national convention placed the burden of responsibility on white America. Consequently, Seminar 22, "Education to Counter Racism," addressed itself to the task of examining: 1. Problems in recognizing the nature and pervasiveness of racism. 2. Problems in identifying areas where change is necessary and possible. 3. Patterns or strategies for these changes. Since the group was small (24-28 participants), a seminar technique was used throughout with every member having ample opportunity to express his concerns and respond to the ideas and experiences of the other participants. In fact, the four1 sessions were conducted as a living experience in one of the suggested patterns for change, a training program focused on personal growth for organizational adaptation to change.1-2 The discussion tone was informal, directed to the real but very diverse life experiences of the participants and aimed at seeking to understand how each participant perceived the problem and what they were doing about it. The four seminar sessions were somewhat unique in that twenty odd white persons succeeded in concentrating on the white aspect of the race issue with only two minority representatives, a Spanish-American participant and a Black resource person, present. Frequently, white people seem helpless in such discussions without the motivation of Black anger or white guilt. Yet as Lerone Bennett has said, "It is in the heart of the white man himself in his peculiarities, in his mental attitudes, in his need for freedom from suspicion, fear, anxiety, doubt, unrest, hate, contempt disgust, that we must situate the racial problem. For too long now, we have focused attention on the Negro, forgetting that the Negro is who he is because white people are what they are" (1970).

Models for Outreach

“More than any other thing, it is a great character that makes a literary classic. More than plot or any special literary device or technique it is the character in his suffering, in his humanity, in his victory, or in his dying. Holden Caulfield is such a character — a sensitive, confused adolescent searching for identity
and purpose for his life. But more than Holden’s misdirection catches our eye; it is his suffering and youthful idealism that brings the challenge. Is this youngster, after all, a Christ-type? Christ comes to us in many forms but always with the same ingredients for redemption: suffering, self-resignation, and hope. For author Salinger he came in Holden and the fat lady of Fanny and Zooey, sitting on a porch, flies flying about her body, dying of some incurable disease. In the Vision of Sir Launjal, he came as a beggar” (1970). America he comes as the burdened black brother. Holden, too, is a brother of the black experience, as is anyone who is forced to sit on the sidelines of life because of rejection, alienation or racism while the establishment plays its game. Although Holden never experienced the special pains that his black brothers have in America, he does serve as a viable model of the Christ-type.

Symposium on Convention Topics

The 1969 Convention of the REA, to be held at the Palmer House, Chicago, on November 23-26, is full of exciting and provocative possibilities. Members of the REA have received the full program in a separate mailing. Our Pre-Convention Issue of September-October 1969 covered many of the topics in a stimulating manner, and we have been fortunate in obtaining some more background articles. This symposium begins with a discussion of the movement toward identity for blacks and the potentialities for the future, by Bishop Johnson.

C. D. Coleman outlines what the black church should do, and Andrew White looks at the church’s responsibility to black youth. Thomas Brown provides an important report on what happens to sex education in the black ghetto. Then we shift our attention to the universities with an article by Langdon Gilkey. This is followed by a report of a teacher of youth in the inner city as they deal with the book of Revelation. Against this background, Allen Moore turns our attention to the possibilities of renewal through education.

Beyondness is a unique dimension of the human spirit. It expresses a reaching beyond the point of arrival; a pull toward some mysterious future which has been born out of the womb of today; a call to some strange destiny to which and for which God has prepared a people. Our theme is "Beyond Blackness to Destiny." But, why beyond blackness? Have we arrived at the point of blackness? And what is the newfound meaning of blackness which has emerged out of the black experience? What were the events, the causes, the circumstances that have thrown us into Religious Education Vol. LXIV No. 6 Nov.-Dec. 7969

this present period of blackness? Why do we assume that beyond blackness there is a destiny and what is the nature of that destiny? In order to interpret the theme correctly we will consider the following: (1) the new thrust for freedom and dignity; (2) interpretation of the meaning of the black experience, and (3) the black experience and the new destiny.

White Racism

James Baldwin indicated “Slowly but surely the leaders in church and synagogue life are seeking to understand the issues of a divided society. The problems simply refuse to go away. No matter who asks us to speak softly and to listen to each other, strident voices continue to call for confrontation without dialogue. As a result, conferences and conventions on the issues of racism, poverty, housing, youth culture, and militarism are being held with great frequency, sometimes resulting in more heat than light.
The Religious Education Association, with its broad base of membership among Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, and Jews, is seeking to be sufficiently analytical to grasp the basic questions and to be sufficiently constructive to move toward some ways out of the morass that threatens us” (1970). He concluded, “Finally, the mandate of this body is not merely good will, not merely paper resolutions. If one believes in the Prince of Peace one must stop committing crimes in the name of the Prince of Peace. The Christian Church still rules this world, it still has the power to change the structure of South Africa. It has the power if it will, to prevent the death of another Martin Luther King, Junior. It has the power, if it will, to force my Government to cease dropping bombs in South-East Asia. There are crimes committed in the name of the Christian Church, and no more than we have absolved the Germans for saying "I didn't know it," "I didn't know what it was about," "I knew of people having been taken away in the night, but it has nothing to do with me." We were very hard on the Germans about that. But Germany is also a Christian nation, and what the Germans did in the Second World War, since they are human and we are human too, there is no guarantee that we are not doing that, right now. When a structure, a State or a Church or a country, becomes too expensive for the world to afford, when it is no longer responsive to the needs of the world, that structure is doomed. If the Christian faith does not recover its Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we shall discover the meaning of what he meant when he said, "Insofar as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me” (1970).

To counter racism, it was suggested, “Then, around tables of eight to ten persons — Black and White, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, young and old, urban and rural, affluent and poor — they discuss the topic for an hour. The final session is given to linking participants to channels of further action in solving the underlying problems which cause the gulf between Black and White. Project Commitment has been presented to representative groups of leaders since April in fifteen cities in the thirteen economic regions of Indiana. A series is now going on or is planned in ten of those fifteen cities and has been approved in principle in four more” (1970).

A Model for Outreach

At the same time, it was suggested, “For eight weeks in the summer of 1969, the staff of the New Lots Reformed Church Day Camp in the East New York section of Brooklyn tried to capture the youthful idealism of Holden Caulfield — a dedication of ourselves and our program to our 165 boys and girls, grades one to eight. A look at our attendance records will reveal that most of our youngsters were in camp day after day, rain or shine. We think that our boys and girls got the message — our commitment to education for responsible freedom and liberation from the burden of racism. The campers understood from the beginning day that the camp existed because they were there. Their presence and their various needs had made the camp possible. This was their world. They were the stars. Therefore, they had to learn to live responsibly and securely in a life situation that was not only for them but of them. This was a vital message for children with the black experience in America.

This approach was not easy for the staff to understand, those who were themselves victims of racism. Such an approach speaks to freedom that they had not experienced themselves: a freedom of action and movement, a freedom to choose your own lifestyle and select those options that are most meaningful for your life. The average black man in the street does not understand this kind of freedom. The average black professional does not understand this kind of freedom. The black man has been chained to his blackness so long that he has forgotten those peaceful shores of Africa and the serenity, security and freedom of tribal life. But the hope of Black Power is restoring this mood of freedom. Black
Power from a Christian stance means, in the words of James Cone, author of Black Theology and Black Power, the task to "analyze the black man's condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people, to destroy white racism." The task is just that simple and just that complex. But this is what any education in a black community must be about whether it's in a summer day camp or a church school” (1970).

As Bill Mason suggested, “In Ernest Harrison's A Church Without God, mother church dies. It is a risky business to have the church acting as a parental surrogate for her people. The church is the body of Christ. Christ is its head. But more important than this, Christ is our brother. The church, then, is a community of brothers and not one of parent-child relationships. What a challenge for parents and church leaders: to give back to the church and the world, in the spirit of brotherhood, children who are just on loan to us for a very short season. It is the recognition of the shortness of this season that will lead us to educate our boys and girls in an atmosphere of greater freedom and trust. We think that even Holden Caulfield might have benefited from his own dream if he had spent a summer as a junior counselor at the New Lots Reformed Church Day Camp” (1970).

A New Agenda for the Black Church

Coleman indicated a new agenda for the Black Church: “At this moment in history, the black church has the unprecedented opportunity to become God's new "Messiah" to a society that badly needs redemption and regeneration. The opportunity is to take hold of this generation of Black Americans, whom God has equipped to fulfill a destiny, to lift them above the seeds of self-destruction and with their newly found self-pride and the genius of the "Black Tradition" give new birth to the American society. The question is not whether the black church has the sagacity to reintegrate a people against impossible odds; history leaves no doubt of this ability. But the question is whether the black church can cease being preoccupied with its institutional status and image, and seize the opportunity to formulate an agenda which will bring the black community to its divine destiny of redeeming and remaking a spiritually denuded society. Our nation is in deep trouble with all the configurations which a racist mentality and a materialistic motivation can generate. Three hundred years of ministering to the needs of a people who were victims of every conceivable form of debasement gave the black church a genius for saving the unsavable and revivifying the destitute. At this point in the confrontation of black and white, the black church has the key which will unlock and mobilize the imagination, commitment and resources of those black and white who are seeking a breakthrough to the new millenium. If the black church can come to a knowledge of itself and the many splendored gifts of its own tradition; if it can take seriously the thought that the current crises in the social order, and the current ferment within the religious order are acts of God and a challenge to its own genius; and if the black church can believe that this is its moment in history, then, it will move with dispatch to begin fulfilling its destiny” (1970).

Bibliography


