

owns Crazy's Claws N' Paws in Goldsboro, North Carolina, an animal-rescue center that was in the process of converting from warehouse space but was not yet legally registered as a shelter. After Florence passed, Hedges was booked on charges that include practicing medicine without a veterinary license. The nonprofit listed details on its Facebook page: "1 count of administering amoxicillin to Big Momma, 1 count of administering Tramadol to Big Momma, 3 counts of administering amoxicillin to

a white Siamese cat, 3 counts of administering a topical antibiotic ointment to a white Siamese cat, 3 counts of administering amoxicillin to Sweet Pea, 1 count of administering amoxicillin to an unnamed black kitten, and 1 count of solicitation to commit a crime." The medicine was "all over-the-counter stuff you could literally find at Dollar Tree," said Raina Nyliram, 24, an animal-rescue volunteer. Hedges "couldn't get the animals to the vet because the vet was closed," she said. "All the charges are bogus." ■

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## WHAT CONSTITUTES CULTURE?

THOMAS STORCK

### I AM NOT WHITE

**T**he title of this article might puzzle those who know me or have met me or have merely seen a picture of me. With an ancestry mostly German, with a large English admixture and bits of Irish and Scottish, I might seem the very embodiment of a "white person." But I deny it, and not only in recognition of G.K. Chesterton's apt remark in his book *Heretics* (1905) that "we give to the European, whose complexion is a sort of pink drab, the horrible title of a 'white man' — a picture more blood-curdling than any spectre in Poe." As correct as Chesterton's statement is, there is a more fundamental

reason for my refusing the designation *white*. That is because I deny that, however one might want to characterize my skin color — white or "pink drab" or whatever — using that color to assert anything important about me is nonsense.

In the tradition of Aristotelian logic, a definition is constituted by genus and specific difference. A human being, for example, is defined as a rational animal — *animal* being the genus or larger group, and *rational* being the specific quality that differentiates us from all other animals. If we were to define human beings as two-legged animals who walk erect, this would not be false, but it would not be a very good definition because neither two-leggedness nor our posture of walking get to the heart of what it means to be a human being the way *rational* does.

And neither does *white* — or any other color, for that matter — do a good job of defining any particular group of human beings. I say this not because I am ashamed of the color of my skin, any more than I am of the color of my hair or my eyes, but because the most salient facts about human beings are not those that concern such external or

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physical matters as skin color. I am quite proud of the European cultural heritage, but that cultural heritage has merely an accidental connection with being white or pink drab or any other color.

Now, I am aware that some argue that white is simply a marker, a substitute, for European or Western. After all, it's simpler to say white than European or Western. But I disagree. First because focusing on skin color shifts the discussion to something superficial and distracts from what is essential. And second for a much more important reason.

Even before the Incarnation and the foundation of the Catholic Church, European culture was potentially open to other nations and peoples. Alexander the Great carried Greek culture eastward, all the way to the borders of India. In his book *The Battleground* (1936), Hilaire Belloc wrote:

Alexander had determined to let all Hellas into Asia, and he succeeded.... In this triumphant policy the settlements of Greek cities did the work. Alexander and his marshals founded Greek cities everywhere.... He also had the wisdom to mix the Greek with the Asiatic blood. He himself married women of that old world.... His officers followed his example.

Greece could not have come into Asia in any other way. It was not in the genius of Hellas to be a bully or even a mere master, and indeed all those who have permanently impressed themselves upon the world have freely intermarried with the governed.

If the universality of the pagan Greek genius was open to all nations, how much more so the universality of Christianity, of the Catholic Church, to which has been entrusted a Gospel destined for the entire world? Indeed, how could a real Christian civilization ever be "a bully or even a mere master" without betraying its Lord and the rule of His sweet and easy yoke?

**H**istorically, Christendom has not been co-extensive with Europe or European peoples. Until the Muslim conquests, important parts of Christendom were in Asia and Africa,

even while large parts of central and northern Europe were still pagan and barbarian strongholds. "The West has nothing to do with race or with Western blood," wrote Frederick D. Wilhelmsen in his book *Citizen of Rome* (1980). Spain, for example, despite the faults committed in her colonization project and her failure always to live up to the high standard of human brotherhood she set for herself, understood this truth well. The Spanish established in Latin America and elsewhere new provinces of Christendom, largely with people of indigenous or mixed blood. As Spanish historian Ramón Menéndez Pidal said in his book *The Spaniards in Their History* (1947), perhaps with a certain amount of exaggeration:

This sense of human brotherhood was felt by every Spanish colonizer, with the consequence that whereas the English or the Dutch did not fuse their blood with that of the nations whom

**"Cultures, as the form of expression of the one being, man, are marked by the dynamics of man, which transcend all boundaries.... They are concerned with encounter and with mutual fertilization."**

**— Pope Benedict XVI**

they colonized, but considered themselves a race apart, and did not strive to attract the native into the family of European civilization, the Spaniards, on the other hand...pursued an active policy of crossbreeding and at the same time devoted themselves to giving the natives both religious and cultural education.

How strange, how perverse, how self-defeating, then, when Catholics in the U.S. regard Latin American Catholics as alien, as *other*, even as enemies. But this is what happens when we make use of the shallow categories of skin color or race or blood, instead of seeing them as our brethren, who share a common Catholic faith.

The importance of reflecting on such matters from a Catholic viewpoint becomes clearer if we advert to the current discussions of "whiteness" and its deconstruction, and of what is called "white privilege" — discussions that have taken shape in

the postmodernist atmosphere so widespread in academia. Some of what is said therein, I grant, is simply thinly disguised or even open disdain for peoples of European descent. But not all of it, I suspect. Some of it is a confused reaction to an equally confused attempt to define or label people by their skin color. Talk of deconstructing whiteness can mean many different things, but there is a sense in which that concept *deserves* to be deconstructed, or pulled apart and critiqued. For how is it that the rich culture of Christendom, a culture that can be and has been shared by many varied peoples around the world, is reduced in the minds of so many to such a vapid thing as skin coloring?

When people speak of deconstructing whiteness, we should be ready with a critique of our own, doubtless quite different from what they had in mind, but one that just might throw the conversation sufficiently off balance so as to enable us to make a point or two. But if we become defensive, if we simply and stupidly defend something called "whiteness," then we invite others to keep the argument centered around something as superficial as physical complexion, and we allow them to create an opposition between "whites" and "people of color," a wholly uninteresting and shallow dualism that says little or nothing significant about human culture or history.

About 25 years ago, Samuel Huntington began talking and writing about what he called the clash of civilizations, and he eventually published a book with that title (1996). Although a Catholic would necessarily have significant criticisms of what Huntington wrote, he did recognize that questions of civilization or culture are paramount. These days, however, we have reverted to

viewing things through the lens of racial or ethnic classifications. But this emphasis on physical characteristics is a mistake. Belloc, in his book *The Crisis of Civilization* (1937), points out that "religion is the main determining element in the formation of a culture or civilization." He notes that many want to posit a different element as determinative, such as "race or blood: it is one of the most fashionable theories of the time in which we live.... The man who makes race everything... is merely preaching a religion of race."

As Belloc says, however, many people have difficulty recognizing the fundamental truth that "religion is the making of a culture." The reason for this reluctance, Belloc avers, is that "we are accustomed to think of religion as a private matter, whereas, in social fact, it is a public one." Sadly, in all or nearly all of what was once Christendom, religion is now regarded as pretty much a purely private affair. In the English-speaking world, 17th-century English philosopher John Locke probably bears the most responsibility for this. His ideas have been extremely influential in the U.S., where we have never had an official national religion, and the First Amendment to the Constitution effectively relegates dogmatic religious concerns to the private sphere. As a result, public discourse is limited to material concerns, exactly as Locke advocated. Hence the tendency to a preoccupation with such matters as skin color, whereas what really differentiates human beings is *culture*, and culture at bottom is always founded on religion, or some secular substitute for religion.

I am not saying that postmodern secular academia would exactly welcome an attempt by Catholics to inject new elements into our national discourse about race and ethnicity. I am merely saying that the novelty of a truly Catholic critique of such matters — a critique that recognizes the fundamental role of culture and that will grant some degree of validity to a deconstruction of whiteness, rather than reacting to such proposals with fear or self-righteousness — just might gain us a hearing among some. So let us shift the conversation to what is really important, to questions of culture and our spiritual and intellectual heritage, and exhibit that serene unconcern for skin color or ethnicity that characterizes the best of our Catholic heritage. ■

