

## **White Supremacy, Religious Orthodoxy, and the Nature of Exclusion**

The Reverend Doctor Brent A. Smith, @ August 6, 2023

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**OPENING WORDS:** The opening words are an adaptation from American Edwin Markham's poem, "Outwitted," often cited as the most straightforward expression of the prophetic call of Universalist theology: "I drew a circle that shut them out. Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But love and they had the wit to win: They drew a circle and took me IN!"

### **SERMON TEXT**

What is it with exclusion, declaring those with whom you will not interact, or those whom you will not serve as customers, or those whom you would not want to be seen with or learn about or even talk to and with? "For my business I will create wedding cakes, but not for them?" In Grand Rapids, "For my business I will provide a church-like venue for weddings to be held, but not for them?" What is it with insisting kinds of human beings don't exist or treating certain people or kinds of people as if they are invisible? The eagerness, the contemporary glee in exclusion and ostracizing others? I just don't get it.

Early on in this sermon the acknowledgement needs be made that there is a difference between speaking and acting, saying and behavior and conduct. Some want to conflate the two, that behaviors and conduct, that actions should be treated as a form of speech, to use liberty as a justification to do anything. That's nonsense. I can think and even confide in my closest friend that I think my spouse is going to divorce me. But that is different than spending months creating secret bank accounts to hide money, visiting good divorce attorneys to spoil the prospect pool, gathering witnesses to create suspicions that she did what she didn't do.

What is said and what believed is one thing, and actions taken are another.

But today it is point of view that concerns us, the origin of belief and speech, and the foundation of action and behavior. Our interest is to contemplate the subjective, interior life of human motivation and yearning and desire and need that yields belief and speech that excludes. And the social groups our actions generate that perform this exclusion. But make no mistake, we are considering invisible things, what we can't see and can only infer. But that's what religion has been and will always be about: what is invisible and yet very real.

Exclusion takes root in how we are constituted as human beings and then becomes embedded and sometimes concealed in our social arrangements, organizations, and institutions which themselves, bear influence back upon us to shape us.

At birth we first encounter the world through our senses and respond to its newness by comparison to the womb. This isn't conscious because we don't possess thinking abilities and comparative skill. Our sense trigger the feeling of dramatic change. A newborn's flailing arms and feet touch coldness in the air and sounds attack as randomly clanging unaccustomed noise. Odors and fragrances assault the nose and the blurriness of objects illuminated by bright lights initiate sight. Taste is a longing physically expressed in smacking lips and the hungry hollowing of pursed lips. Sensations send signals to a mind which is now beginning to generate thought,

and thus begins our living and immediately bias begin to generate in that each of us was born in a different place intersecting time differently and relying as each human being does on what is uniquely experienced sensorially that I can only describe generally. Sensations transmitted to the brain whereupon thinking transforms sensations into ideas, the fuel for cognition and, eventually, a miracle ensues: Each of us develops a slightly, or completely different “view” of the world, with the difference being in degree, but real difference.

Initially, we’re not aware of the differences between our point of view and the billions of others on the planet, and a development takes place that is a lifelong process of forming and expanding. But always this is a composed point of view, a *point* and *not a view from every point!* Or, as one New Realist philosopher wrote, “... for something to be able to exist it must belong to a field of sense,”<sup>i</sup> and in this room there are as many different fields of sense as people in the room, and billions in the world, all of which are invisible to any one of us. William James called this the pluralistic universe, an oxymoronic juxtaposition of contradictions, “plural” AND “unitary.” Like the race horse our point of view is formed as much in “not seeing” as seeing. Thus, if “The world is the field of sense in which all fields of sense appear,”<sup>ii</sup> this whole and all is invisible to any one of us. Strangely what we call “*the world is not found in the world*”<sup>iii</sup>.”

If we could ask a racehorse to tell what the world is, because it wears racing blinders it wouldn’t take into account spectators, the worldwide television audience, those who don’t see the race, all of the physical features that aren’t the dirt track. And most of all, if it is one of the lead horses all blessed with innate physical skill and power, the privilege of good trainers, and the luck of drawing a good gate position, the point of view includes only the other lead horses but none behind it!

How old were you when you realized this? For me, I am rediscovering this constantly.

The world that I talk about as if I know it, the field of sense containing all of your fields of sense plus all of those from people in the whole world, that world that I claim to know about, is completely invisible to me. It is excluded from my caress and earshot, my sniff and view, and my nibble. And we talk about that world, this pluralistic universe as if we know it and possess central truths about it.

“I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery,” wrote one religionist, “than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it.”<sup>iv</sup> We exist in mystery yet claim to know the truths of existing in this world.

And when we enter the social world shared with others we virtually swim inside of invisibilities. Think just about your children when they were young or your parents when you were young. So much, much more of a child’s life is invisible to the parent than visible. What your children did at school, how they relate to others, understand themselves through their interactions with classmates. Or, your parents who all did they interact with at work or home while you were in school. The vast amount of their social world and its effects on them were, and still are invisible.

Yet, Behavioral Scientists have long identified our need to belong, that frequent and enjoyable social interactions are foundational both to our well-being and our sense of who we are and

become. Evidently this was an evolutionary yield over tens of thousands of years because social groups held reproductive benefits and multiplied the chances of survival in a world that too often is hostile to human life. The development of self-worth and the gaining of the possession of self-esteem come from interactions with others and the activity of group tasks that embed meaning and purpose. Finally, it is in the bonds of group affection and loyalty whereby we, paradoxically, can develop our own sense of agency and of self-determination.

But belonging, connecting deeply with others, and coming to see our identity in relation to others, is formed with exclusion. My childhood small town block of 12 houses, 24 kids I could play with, was a group formed by boundaries that excluded. I was born into it. You either lived on the block or you didn't. Other groups are formed by our choices, like choosing to move into the Block. But camouflaged were the exclusions of who could make or be given that choice. Groups are powerful instruments of individual identity formation that are innately exclusionary. Their deep bonds are formed in affection extending to some but not all, exclusion, whether recognized or not, is part of how through group identity, individuals present their "self" to the world. I'm from Southwest 16<sup>th</sup> street, which also means my point of view was formed within the exclusion of having been raised on the hundreds of other streets of my hometown.

And yet in groups this exclusionary nature is largely invisible because those who are excluded aren't seen. We come to experience ourselves through the sensations and ideas we gain from association, the people we surround ourselves with. And we add this to our point of view about "the world that exists," that is reflected back to us, through groups. Even though they are innately exclusionary. I drew a circle to keep them out even though it might not occur to me I'm drawing one when I am!

The exclusory nature of White Supremacist groups are like religious groups formed by "right beliefs you must believe to be a member," called orthodoxy from the Greek, simply in that both make exclusion explicit and central to identity, the invisible made highly visible. They merge the subjective illusion that we can know the world that exists, with the innately exclusionary nature of human social groupings to generate a point of view of purposeful exclusion. Exclusion becomes identity. It distorts belonging by using the need to belong to bludgeon others by ostracizing.

Both groups generate identity as much by whom they exclude and ostracize, as by who is included. Identity as a circle drawn to exclude.

But what is curious to note today is that evidence shows both White Supremacist groups and churches built upon orthodoxy, are in decline.

What is alarming is that the restocking of exclusion is shifting from hate groups and religious groups built upon explicit exclusion, to a camouflaging of exclusion in the every day. Exclusion hidden in plain sight. Whereas 60 years ago and before, writes historian David Chalmers:

"... the Klan and other white supremacist groups were dispositionally conservative.... [existing to maintain and protect] a white supremacist society... to keep things the way they were... But following the entrance of our country into multiracial democracy in the late Sixties, their tactic

changes... They're no longer winning, they're losing. And so now they're fighting to restructure the country back to the way it was... [by putting] their toxic propaganda out into the world via the internet, via pamphlets, via television shows, via mainstream politics, so that an individual can become radicalized."<sup>v</sup>

In this way bonds between persons are not developed by affection one to another but by exclusion of others unlike the group. And its this “toxic propaganda” of exclusion, proffered by organized racism on the one hand and organized religion on the other, that is fading as we see these groups in decline, becomes woven invisibly into the fabric of our everyday life.

The old Unitarian saying – “The bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom” – promotes the prophetic idea that in widening our affection more freedom is the yield. That we realize we run the race with blinders, individually and in groups, but that the deepest affection is cultivated for those know and feel exclusion because that affection makes us all free.

That’s why God is no projection of human thought nor does God hold a truth we will ever surmise. God is a love we don’t yet possess and will not until we forsake the way we contend that God’s love can exclude anyone of us. To borrow the metaphor from Jesus, existence is like a wedding banquet, a feast to celebrate the love that exists through our words and actions. We human beings would create a list of whom to invite, family, friends, acquaintances, and would spend part of our time evaluating and judging who should be invited because we cannot provide food and drink for everyone. No couple can invite all. Which, of course, means we exclude. But the Kingdom of God, God operating in existence, is different. God invites all, excludes no one, “gathers all the people that can be found, both good and bad,”<sup>vi</sup> “Go out into the highways and hedges, and invite all to come.”<sup>vii</sup> Whereas human love excludes, God’s love does not. God’s love is a feast for all.<sup>viii</sup> And it is towards this Divine Love that all be beckoned.

I drew a circle that shut them out. Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But God’s love, the divinity of affection, had will and wit to win, and drew a circle and that took all souls in.

AMEN. SO BE IT. SHALOM. SHALEM. NAMASTE.

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<sup>i</sup> Markus Gabriel, *The World Does Not Exist*, p. 73

<sup>ii</sup> IBID, 74

<sup>iii</sup> IBID

<sup>iv</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Riverside Sermons*, p 22

<sup>v</sup> “‘They’re losing’: Author explains why white supremacist groups are dissolving,” Brandon Gage, retrieved at: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/they-re-losing-author-explains-why-white-supremacist-groups-are-dissolving/ar-AA1dBub2?ocid=hpmsn&cvid=db37014694464a4ea4d3334247394748&ei=12>

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 22:10

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 14:23b

<sup>viii</sup> This rendering combines The Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22) with The Parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14), as many Biblical scholars find the parallels between the two stories indicate a common narrative tradition,