



Cultivate an open mind

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Will Race Always Be Relevant?

Why Recent Flare-Ups Actually Prove America Is Evolving Past Racism

We've all witnessed or experienced the ugly reality of racism. And while most people feel our culture has made great strides against it, recent highly visible incidents seem to suggest otherwise. Author Jim Kenney says the race-based backlash we're seeing proves that our culture actually is leaving racism behind.

Chicago, IL (September 2010)—What's the state of racism in America? Let's examine the evidence. A black president occupies the White House, but over a quarter of the public doubts his citizenship (and many question his religious affiliation). Black U.S. Agriculture Department official Shirley Sherrod found herself at the center of a firestorm with the release of a (misleadingly edited) video purporting to show her admitting to past racism against a white farmer. And celebrities like Dr. Laura Schlessinger and Mel Gibson have been taken to task for using the "n-word."

To the casual observer, it might appear that race-based hate and fear are alive and thriving in America. But according to author Jim Kenney, appearances can be misleading. As a society, we are rapidly evolving past racism.

"These flare-ups of racially tinged anger and prejudice are actually indicative of a steady trend toward lasting positive change," asserts Kenney, author of *Thriving in the Crosscurrent: Clarity and Hope in a Time of Cultural Sea Change* (Quest Books, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-8356087-6-3, \$16.95, www.seachanges.net). "When you understand the big picture, you'll see that we're actually living through a time of dramatic cultural evolution—and racism is dying a much-deserved death."

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In his book, Kenney theorizes that old values like racism—not to mention patriarchy, war mongering, and exploitation of nature—are rapidly giving way to new values of gender equity, human rights, nonviolence, and ecological awareness. And—as with all sea changes—there’s going to be resistance.

“Much of the bad news you hear is actually an expression of the turbulence created by the clash between the declining wave of ‘older values’ and the ascending wave of ‘new values,’” Kenney explains. “We’re at a period of crossing right now, and by necessity it’s a time of great chaos. That’s what happens when identities are questioned and existing power structures threatened. From the turbulence, disruptive ‘eddies’ of resistance will emerge...but no eddy ever reversed the flow of a new stream.”

For most of us, that’s a truly encouraging perspective. Read on to learn more about Kenney’s sea change perspective on racism:

Distressing “eddies” aren’t a glimpse of the future—they’re the last holdouts of the past.

Perhaps the most important approach to the racism question in a sea change context draws on the concept of the “eddy,” the whirlpool of resistance to genuine cultural progress. There is simply no real reason to doubt the extraordinary advancement of global activism on behalf of social justice and human rights, and the simultaneous decline of patriarchy, classism, and racism.

“I’ll admit, though, that from a more everyday perspective, it can be easy to misunderstand the eddying forces of resistance to change,” Kenney concedes. “When you hear stories of intolerance and prejudice, it’s natural to fear that they’re real indicators of things to come. The truth is, though, that they’re actually laments for things that are even now passing from reality. Evolutionary processes like this don’t happen overnight, but they *are* inevitable.”

Racist backlash is increasingly tinged with ridiculousness. Sadly, the eddying energies of racially-based misunderstanding, mistrust, bias, and hatred have not yet dissipated. In fact, in politically charged times like our own, they intensify. The quiet but steady evolution of pluralist openness, however, can never really be slowed by cultural ignorance and political cynicism. As proof, notes Kenney, the messages of those who foment racial discord seem less and less plausible to the average American.

In support of his point, he quotes a column written one year ago by journalist Bob Herbert on the opposition to the nomination of Sonia Sotomayor to the U.S. Supreme Court. Kenney notes that Herbert captures the essential destructiveness (and the ultimate futility) of the racist eddy:

It was always silly to pretend that the election of Barack Obama was evidence that the U.S. was moving into some sort of post-racial, post-ethnic, post-gender nirvana. But it did offer a basis for optimism. There is every reason to hope that we've improved as a society to the point where the racial and ethnic craziness of the Gingriches and Limbaughs will finally have a tough time finding any sort of foothold.

Those types can still cause a lot of trouble, but the ridiculousness of their posture is pretty widely recognized. Thus the desperate howling.

To see evidence that we've changed our racist ways, look no further than ordinary people. Even in the southern, western, and rural regions of the country, where racial prejudice was once at its most intense, change is undeniably evident.

“A generation or two ago, many of the same whites who today acknowledge the entrenched prejudice in society would, themselves, likely have espoused a deep antipathy toward people of color,” Kenney points out. “Their vocabulary would have been laced with racial slurs, even mild ones like ‘them.’ Increasingly, that’s no longer the case. Who can deny the evolutionary change that we’ve all witnessed?”

And on a broader scale, Kenney points out that:

- Slavery, widespread just a few generations ago, has all but vanished as a cultural pattern in most of the world;
- Racial segregation is legally and culturally discredited in the United States and in most other countries;
- People of once systematically oppressed ethnicities, while still encountering resistance and serious obstacles to advancement, nevertheless find opportunities unimaginable to their own parents and grandparents;
- A new generation in America and Europe—and increasingly in the developing world—is coming to regard racist attitudes as curiously anachronistic and insupportable.

Incredibly, the concept of “race” itself is slowly fading. Think back a bit and you’ll recall that social science, not so very long ago, regularly employed the construct of “race” in an attempt to model cultural differences. The fading of that convention is itself a dramatic sign that things are changing. In *Thriving in the Crosscurrent*, Kenney observes that:

Theories about the evolution of cultures, it turns out, need not be racist at all. Races, in fact, seem to be convenient fictions, based largely on relatively minor physical differences. New theories suggest that, genetically, humans differ only slightly from region to region. Why then do human societies differ so dramatically and how do they change? That’s still the question, but theoretical approaches have changed radically. Cultural evolutionism is back....

“It seems,” he elaborates, “that the differences among the Earth’s human communities emerge from the complexities of culture, rather than from inflexible biological laws. And, if that’s the case, there is no group who is exempt from the progressive cultural evolution that’s now underway.”

“Actually, racialism is fading fast,” Kenney writes in *Thriving in the Crosscurrent*. “Recent developments on the American political scene strongly suggest that our youngest generation is postracial. Racism remains on the scene but is increasingly socially rejected. We can easily imagine a postracial social atmosphere in the twenty-first century. Something is stirring.”

Words of encouragement, indeed.

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About the Author:

Jim Kenney has been recognized for decades as a leader in the global movement for intercultural understanding. Working to promote harmony and cooperative action among the world’s religious communities, he had a major role in the two largest interreligious gatherings ever held, the 1993 and 1999 Parliaments of the World’s Religions (Chicago and Cape Town). He was global director of the Parliament from 1995 to 2002; and, in 2002, he founded the Interreligious Engagement Project, helping global interreligious communities address critical planetary issues.

Kenney is the cofounder and executive director of Common Ground, an adult educational center offering a wide range of programs on the great cultural, religious, philosophical, and spiritual traditions and their implications for every dimension of human experience. He is also cofounder and coeditor of *Interreligious Insight: A Journal of Dialogue and Engagement* and, from 1988 to 2009, was consulting editor and a regular contributor to *Conscious Choice*, an alternative-living magazine based in Chicago.

For over thirty years, Jim has lectured widely on political, social, religious, and cultural issues. Over the past decade, his research and writing have focused on cultural evolution: how human societies adapt—sometimes dramatically—to a changing world. *Thriving in the Crosscurrent* is the pinnacle of that work.

For more information, please visit www.seachanges.net.

About the Book:

Thriving in the Crosscurrent: Clarity and Hope in a Time of Cultural Sea Change (Quest Books, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-8356087-6-3, \$16.95, www.seachanges.net) is available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.