

The Last War: Racism, Spirituality, and the Future of Civilization. By M. L. Perry. Oxford: George Ronald, 2005. xiv + 338 pages.

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In a scholarly era when books on race have become commonplace and not always insightful in breaking new ground, Mark Perry's book, *The Last War: Racism, Spirituality, and the Future of Civilization*, challenges both scholars and laypersons to expand and deepen their understanding of the relationship between race, spirituality, and civilization.

Perry's approach to his subject is based upon what he explains as Bahá'u'lláh's unique vision of the relationship between religion and human society. He argues that "Bahá'u'lláh's vision is of critical importance for understanding humanity's transition from its turbulent adolescence to maturity and particularly for the resolution of racism" (ix). It is here that he departs from most contemporary scholarship on racism and bravely enters the domain of spirituality. His focus on slavery and racism in North American centers on the role of Christianity in the rise of Western civilization; he argues that true religion teaches love under "the most trying circumstances." He is unapologetic in asserting the "fundamental importance of spirituality and the religious life" in studying race and racism.

The book is divided into four sections that include countless strands of world history. The first discusses racism and spirituality; the second focuses on what Perry terms "Despiritualization: The Archeology of Racism" and introduces the reader to a radically new approach to the study of racism. Using archeology as a theoretical framework, Perry divides this section into eleven levels: the Denial of Racism; Covert Racism, Present to the 1960s; Overt Racism, 1960s to the 1860s; Slavery, 1960s to the 1500s; Justifications; Substitute Belief Systems; Violent Materialism in America; Waning of Christianity in Europe; Spiritual Unity of Europe; Paganism; and Feral Humanity.

The much shorter third section, "Respiritualization," deals with

“America’s continuing spiritual potential,” “the respiritualization of social science,” “the insufficiency of material solutions,” “the respiritualization of daily life,” and “justice.” and is followed by a segment called “Beyond Affirmative Action,” in which he includes a discussion on education described as “A True Panacea” and “A Remedy Withheld.”

In the fourth section, “Civilization,” Perry describes “the maturation of human society” and the “fusion of the human race,” and ends with a discussion of “the birth of true humanity.”

The topics and subtopics in this book can be overwhelming as they intertwine with the major historical narrative. They are held together, however, by Perry’s major claim that discussions of spirituality are vital to the solution of racial problems, that there is a need to revalidate spirituality in our discourse on race and its solution. “The fact is that spirituality is real, its operation powerful, its neglect fraught with dire consequences. The lack of brotherhood, the absence of spirituality, make possible the inhuman treatment of one by the other. Racism and slavery are the symptoms or consequences of the ebbing of spirituality from the social landscape” (16).

Perry makes the bold claim that we must question the secular methods of solving problems based on materialism, as it was materialism which created slavery and developed racism to justify and support the practice. In the chapter on “despiritualization” he writes:

. . . American slavery was not distinguished by its ideology so much as by the skin color and large number of its victims. We have been blinded by color and hence fetishized it; we have been deceived into thinking that color and Africanness are the keys to understanding slavery and racism, whereas these are only incidental. . . . Race and skin color are nothing but red herrings. The same attitudes and actions were practiced in Europe in the two centuries bracketing the establishment of the North American colonies but there the victims were neither dark-skinned nor African, but

European women. Once we realize and accept this parallel we begin to broaden our conception of slavery, to see it as a part of a wider context that is not specific to any particular “race,” nationality or even gender. In fact, all that these victims have in common is that they were treated the same way by the same group of people: with extreme and unjust violence by European males for the purpose of material and political gain. This is yet another reason why the study of racism and slavery needs to focus not on the African slaves but on the mentality and motives of the European males who “owned” them. (165)

Perry insists that we first explore the factors that led to “despiritualization.” As we proceed to unravel the threads of each stratum, we are exposed to the various racial beliefs, practices, and policies that made up that stratum. For example, at level one, we observe the denial of racism, as Perry explains, “the common belief that African Americans should have done what other ethnic groups did when they arrived in America . . . pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. . . . At level One most people really believe this; they take the mask as reality” (25–26).

Using his framework of the archeology of racism, we see the “evolution of justification,” where the European self is defined as sacred and the African other is defined as profane. We witness the legalization of racist justifications, “whiteness as sacred,” and “the roots of white male privilege.” According to Perry, racism in America resembles a cult. It is a substitute for religion. “Tight-knit racist communities prevent minorities from integrating their schools and neighborhoods and prevent their own members from befriending minorities” (136).

Despiritualization not only created the conditions for slavery and racism, but also prevented society from viewing slavery and racism within the Christian moral context. In short, Perry argues, “Since we do not examine slavery and racism in the Christian moral context, we do not regard slavery and racism as violations of fundamental Christian laws” (143). We therefore dismiss the relevance of Christianity, “effectively

calling it a myth, for it has no authority in society, no reality" (143). This, the author contends, leads, in turn, to "violent materialism" and what he calls "permissions-to-hate."

Violent materialism emerged due to the waning of both Christianity and morality in Europe. Spirituality went underground as it lost influence in politics and social life. Increasing despiritualization engendered related forms of inhumanity: inquisitions, enslavement, genocide, and witch-hunts. Perry brilliantly articulates an often neglected linkage between witch-hunts and African slavery. "Students of American history will readily recognize that virtually all of these powerful charges against women in the two centuries of the witch-hunts were neatly projected, with only slight variation, onto the personality and physical body of the African slave in America" (165). Jews, Muslims, and Christian heretics also suffered the same fate.

Arriving at the bottom level of excavation in his archeology of racism, Perry poses the question: "Why do human beings show in all periods of history this unwillingness to follow spiritual ideals? Why are we not attracted to the spiritual life?" (199). The answer is clear: "There is no escaping the animal nature within us. We cannot run from or erase it; we can only exercise our equally innate spiritual and intellectual powers to transcend it. . . . the spiritual powers must ever be consciously and diligently cultivated in order to appear, take root, flourish and bear fruit" (201).

Coming full circle, Perry concludes the section on despiritualization by arguing that "Slavery, racism and violent materialism in the West were caused by the weakening and partial collapse of the Christian laws that fostered spiritual unity. This breakdown was a symptom of spiritual immaturity. The slave-holders shunned Christianity as a hindrance to business. They faced a choice: God's way or profit, spirituality or materialism. And because they sought to maximize profits, there was no middle way" (202). Furthermore, Perry argues, ". . . had the Christian teachings been practiced as the basis of social unity, had the *Christianity* of the Church been stronger, the virulent racism of the North American

colonies would not have found a suitable environment in which to germinate and evolve" (203).

The third section of the book, "Respiritualization," opens with the argument that since advocates of slavery worked so hard to "clear religion's influence from the promising field of unlimited capitalism in North America . . . [and] considered the removal of spiritual unity essential to the success of slavery, spiritual revitalization logically is key to the elimination of racism" (205). Here is where the real work begins for Perry, because few scholars of race relations will find such an argument convincing. Notwithstanding the risk, Perry marshals some convincing evidence and crafts his arguments in line with the earlier section on despiritualization.

Perry writes that "There is room for optimism that America's struggle with materialism is not hopeless" (206). That America has been endowed with spiritual potential is reflected in many forms, from the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Harriet Beecher Stowe to the more contemporary spiritual perspectives of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Marilyn Ferguson's *Aquarian Conspiracy*. He reminds the reader that this spiritual potential was evident in the actions of some whites during the eras of slavery and segregation, many of whom "[c]ontrary to popular understanding . . . were opposed to slavery" (207), citing the example of the heroic rescue of Elizabeth Eckford by whites during the integration of Little Rock High School in September 1957.

This spiritual potential also can be seen in America's popular songs, such as "Nature Boy," recorded by Nat King Cole in the late 1940s, and "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," from the musical *South Pacific*, followed by "several waves of new mystical and spiritual culture created by the Beat poets, the civil rights movement, the Native Americans, the hippies and the new feminism of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s" (209).

The respiritualization of social science is a key requirement if America is to fulfill its spiritual potential, particularly given the limitations and "insufficiency of material solutions" (212). Perry explains that "We cannot understand the causes of social problems such as racism

until we understand the full context in which they occur, a context which necessarily involves spiritual reality" (212). Respiritualization extends into many other areas of daily life as well, for example, justice and education.

It is in the last section, entitled "Civilization," that Perry makes his strongest and most ambitious claim, linking race and spirituality to the future of civilization. "It seems out of place, does it not, in the context of a discussion of racism? Social problems like racism are always associated with policy questions and historical circumstances and so religion, law, and even science naturally enter the debate. But civilization?" (265).

Once again departing from traditional scholarly approaches to race relations in the United States, Perry explains how a discussion of civilization must be part of the debate on race.

It is in the building of true civilization that racism ends. Racism does not end in mere policies and strategies, workshops and focus groups, however important and useful they may be. All that we have discussed thus far shows that the very existence of racism is due to the collapse of true civilization as a whole. Therefore, African and European Americans are not waiting for the Godot of a strategy, policy or concept to rectify the wrongs of American society; rather they are waiting to build a true civilization, the civilization that was the road not taken when in the 1600s the American colonists went for the gold. (265)

While Perry's book is both an excellent, insightful read on race, religion, and spirituality, stimulating new ways of thinking about these topics, it is often difficult to keep track of the major themes. Perry seems to want to include far too many topics and is not always successful in integrating and fully developing those he introduces. There are too many subtopics in each section, which distract the reader from following the author's impressive arguments on the relevance of spirituality to the study of race relations.

That being said, the book has the making of a classic. It will certainly force scholars of race relations and religion to rethink old, comfortable paradigms rooted in materialism and secularism. Those of us who are a bit shy of introducing spirituality into our scholarly discourse on race and religion now have a worthy book to assist us in the undertaking.