

HOW DID THE CREATOR BECOME A WHITE RACIST?

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How did the Creator become a white racist? This question lurks behind the recent shooting spree by Benjamin Smith who spent the 4th of July weekend cruising in his car through Illinois and Indiana, taking random shots at Jews (visible by their garb), African-Americans and Asians. Two were killed and another nine wounded before Smith apparently shot himself in a police chase.

Smith was a disciple of the World Church of the Creator, a white supremacist group boasting a few thousand members across the United States. The group's members have been involved in racist leafleting and violence since 1991.

The World Church of the Creator, founded in 1973 and currently led from the home of Matthew Hale in East Peoria, Ill., teaches that only white Anglo-Saxons are true human beings, descendants of Adam and Eve. Jews are the illegitimate offspring's of Eve and Satan. African-Americans and other people of color are descendants of inferior non-Adamite anthropoids. The World Church believes the United States should be "cleansed" of all Jews and non-whites. The church claims this should happen by deportation, but the church also harbors scenarios of a coming apocalyptic holy war between the races.

Mainstream Christians can only be repelled by such ideas, which seem to have little to do with Christian tradition. But such ideas have an old, if largely unrecognized, history in the churches generally and American Christianity in particular.

There are four themes that have been woven together to produce the "theology" of the World Church of the Creator and other Christian Identity churches. These themes are:

- 1) the doctrine of orders of creation;
- 2) the belief in an "elect nation;"
- 3) theories that Jews and other races are not descendants of Adam; and
- 4) an apocalyptic holy war between God's elect and the minions of Satan.

The doctrine of the Orders of Creation is found in medieval thought, but was particularly developed by Calvinism. It draws on the household codes (i.e. Colossians 3:18, 4:1; I Peter 2:13-3:7) of the New Testament to define the hierarchy of men over women, masters over slaves and parents over children as God's ordained ordering of society, established by divine decree at creation.

With European colonization and enslavement of Africans, this doctrine was expanded to define the white race as fundamentally distinct from and superior to non-whites. Races should not mingle and to do so is to violate God's order of creation and produce degenerate offspring. This idea underlay anti-miscegenation laws that forbade racial intermarriage in the United States, legislation that still remains on the books in Alabama. South African apartheid, backed by the Afrikaner Calvinist theology, also drew on this theory.

The idea of the elect nation of Jewish tradition was appropriated by European nationalism in the 16th Century to declare that one or another European nation is God's elect. One expression of this was 19th Century British Israelism, which taught that the British are the descendants of the 10 lost tribes of Israel who migrated to the British Isles. Americans appropriated the idea with gusto that they are the True Israel, God's elect nation and promised land. In Christian Zionism this theme has been used to welcome Jews to America as special "kin," as well as to establish a favored relation between the United States and Israel.

But in the 1930s, with the rise of fascism, this idea took an anti-Semitic turn in the United States. Jews were seen as engaging in a world conspiracy against God's elect American nation. This was reinforced by an idea popular with 19th Century racists, namely that only members of the white race are descendants of Adam and Eve. Other races descend from pre-Adamite anthropoids or the coupling of Eve and Satan. Ancient Jewish agnostic traditions have seen this union of Eve with Satan as the source of Cain. American racists took up this idea but identified the Jews with this spurious offspring of Eve and Satan, and non-whites as the pre-Adamites.

These ideas were revived by Wesley A. Swift, Ku Klux Klan leader and founder of the Church of Jesus Christ, Christian in 1948. Swift's teachings became the root of various Christian Identity movements, such as the Aryan Nations, that rose in the late '60s and early '70s as a far right wing of the Christian right's reaction against the successes of the civil-rights movement.

While such Christian Identity groups number perhaps 50, 000 core members, they have recently targeted alienated white youth in affluent suburbs and have considerable presence through a number of Web sites and the promotion of racist music aimed at the young. Thus their potential for violence in a paranoid gun-saturated culture is considerable.

Christian churches need to do more than wring their hands in dismay over such misunderstandings of Christian teaching. We need to take responsibility for more mainstream patterns of thought that feed racist extremism: namely belief in a God who ordered creation as a hierarchy that sacralizes the power of dominant groups over others, who favors some nations and religions against others and who mandates war and violence as a way to establish God's reign on Earth.

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GRAPHIC: Illustration by John Overmyer.

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