

Race still matters: Moral amnesia in America

Feature in the [February 21, 2006](#) issue

In 1970, when Timothy Tyson was ten years old, a black man named Henry “Dickie” Marrow was murdered in Oxford, North Carolina, allegedly for making a sexual comment to a white woman. Despite the testimony of eyewitnesses, the killers, Robert and Larry Teel—known to be Klansmen—were acquitted by an all-white jury. Tyson’s father, Vernon, a United Methodist minister, was one of two white people who attended Marrow’s funeral and joined the funeral march to the cemetery. After pursuing degrees in African-American studies, Timothy Tyson wrote a book about events in Oxford. Blood Done Sign My Name (Three Rivers Press) combines history, moral passion and storytelling. Tyson teaches African-American studies at the University of Wisconsin. We spoke with him about his book and the civil rights era.

Many Americans seem to have the impression that the civil rights era occurred a long time ago and that the issues have long since been resolved.

Moral fatigue also plagued early 20th-century Christians, who watched largely without comment as two or three African Americans were tortured to death in public every week, and who cheered as black citizens lost the right to vote. There has never been a time when white Americans were not ready to declare the race problem solved. The largest elements of the church today have made an unspoken deal with the larger culture, sharing its preoccupations, prejudices and politics in exchange for power and respectability.

Legal segregation is dead, yet America is more segregated in some respects now than when I was a boy. The gap between rich and poor is many times wider than it was back then. The country’s inner cities are much harder places to live in than they were 30 years ago. More than 40 percent of African-American children today grow up in poverty. When a young black man and a young white man go before a court, charged with the same first-time offense, carrying the same clean record, the young

black man is eight times more likely to see a prison cell; if they are both charged with a drug offense, the young black man is 49 times more likely to see a prison cell. We have given up on rehabilitation, and now the people we're letting out of prison are more dangerous than the people we are putting in.

Things are better in other ways, especially for middle-class African Americans. Doors are open for blacks whose backgrounds permit them to accommodate themselves to traditionally white places like Yale and Princeton. But generally those are not the people whom Martin Luther King Jr. addressed when he was in Memphis, just before he was shot, trying to help the garbage workers win a living wage.

Ought we to teach this history differently?

We ought to teach an honest history, and avoid the celebratory and triumphal impulses of the kind that recently led the Japanese government to censor the history of Japan's bloody imperial conquests during World War II. That does not mean underselling our achievements or wallowing in self-flagellation. We turn to our nation's history, even its painful racial past, not to wring our hands but to redeem a democratic promise. At our best, we have sought to feed the hungry and free the oppressed. At our worst, we have practiced genocide and slavery. "The struggle of humanity against power," Milan Kundera tells us, "is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

Many in the mainline churches remember the civil rights movement as a kind of golden age, a time when churches were on the side of the angels. Is that accurate?

The church should never forget that mainline churches failed the African-American freedom struggle and mostly opposed it. The mainstream white churches of the South would not abide ministers who supported the movement. And though we think of the movement as based in the black church, most black churches were not part of the movement. Wyatt T. Walker, Dr. King's field general in Birmingham, estimated that in the spring of 1963, the movement had the support of 15 percent of the African-American ministers in Birmingham. The notion that the church stood up strong during the civil rights era reveals a dangerous moral amnesia.

You suggest in your book that the main difference between Robert and Larry Teel, who murdered Henry Marrow, and the Tysons may have been that the Tyson family was exposed to the gospel, which smoothed some of

the rough edges on a hardscrabble eastern North Carolina farming life. One wants this to be true.

I'm reminded of the story of Huck Finn, who heard about God from the kindly Widow Douglas and also from the stern and judgmental Miss Watson. Huck figured that you'd fare pretty well with the widow's God, but that if Miss Watson's got hold of you, there'd be no hope.

There was a lot of Christianity in eastern North Carolina, but much of it was not very expansive. Jack Tyson's God was big and big-hearted. The Tysons were as flawed as the Teels, as flawed as anybody else, but our sins don't tend to be the stingy, hard-handed sins or the snobby sins of exclusion. Failures of humility, excesses of passion, riotous excesses of appetite and raging expressions of temper—those are the Tyson sins. But if love will fix it, we do all right.

The civil rights movement is usually remembered as a case in which nonviolence worked. You seem to want to counter that view, and you draw on Reinhold Niebuhr's theology in noting that the power structure in Oxford responded to racism only when power was brought to bear on it and parts of town were torched.

The distinction between Niebuhr's theology and the civil rights movement is somewhat artificial. The difference between burning an unoccupied warehouse and refusing to surrender a seat at a segregated lunch counter is significant, but both actions are designed to exert economic pressure. Nonviolent direct action at its most effective was surely Niebuhrian in that it operated as political coercion, not moral appeal. King called nonviolence "merely a Niebuhrian stratagem of power."

The armies of nonviolence descended on Birmingham in 1963 determined to create intolerable tension in the community, to inflict an unbearable economic price, to shame the U.S. in the eyes of the world and undermine its claim to be a beacon of democracy, and to force the national government to intervene. Popular memory casts nonviolence as an appeal to the better angels of our nature, but this is sugar-coated nonsense.

Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and life taught Dr. King that power without love may be bankrupt, but that love without power is saccharine and vacant; that to have justice we must harness power in the service of love, and always remember, as we pursue justice, that we are no angels ourselves.

How has *Blood Done Sign My Name* been received in Oxford?

Before the book was published, my father, the romantic white liberal, imagined that it would create a wonderfully redemptive and healing moment for Oxford: “They may invite Tim to speak at city hall and Webb High School. We may have Easter sunrise service at Henry Marrow’s grave, and the whole community come together.” When he heard my father say that, Eddie McCoy, a radical black activist, commented, “There’s goes Reverend Tyson again, dreaming of a white Christmas!”

I am not making any plans for Easter morning, but the rest of it has happened. The book has sold hundreds and hundreds of copies in Granville County, and the library has loads of copies, all of them backlogged. I have been invited to speak at the high school twice and once at city hall. Hundreds of people from Oxford have come to hear me and engage in discussions and hundreds more have written me letters and e-mails, all but one of them favorable. About 200 people signed up to participate in interracial reading or prayer groups in Oxford. I had not even dared to hope for such things.

The people of Granville County have decided, by and large, to embrace their history and their future, turning to each other instead of on each other. I am not trying to say that the millennium has come and made Oxford a racial utopia. White people still own everything. New racial resentments have arisen from the large influx of Latino folks who have come to take “black” jobs and make a better life for their families. Public institutions have suffered from the stingy and resentful response of white people to the black presence in those institutions, and so our sense of the commonwealth has been badly damaged. But the kind of violence that Oxford experienced in 1970 is far less distinctive in America than the community’s remarkable response today. Oxford deserves a lot of credit—and it needs to keep working at it too.

What main points of the story do you try to get across when speaking to ministers and seminarians?

I try to wean them from the habit of trying to put a redemptive spin on history. We need redemption, to be sure, but that’s God’s job. We don’t do ourselves any favors by producing a false historical narrative. There is a temptation among Christians to decide, in advance of actually examining the evidence on the ground, that history was redemptive and faith-driven and somehow theologically focused. I want redemption and reconciliation too, and I will take it where I can find it. But I think I

am a pretty good nonsense detector, having grown up among people whom I admire for their audacious and unjustified hope.