Breaking ranks: Glenn Loury's change of heart—and mind

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Glenn C. Loury had a lot going for him in the 1980s. The first black to be tenured in economics at Harvard, Loury was a famed black neoconservative and opponent of affirmative action. He dined at the White House and joined the Reagan administration. Conservative journals vied for his work. He was on the “A” list for events hosted by people like William F. Buckley Jr. and William Bennett.

But when Loury hit bottom as the result of a drug addiction in 1988, it was the 23rd Psalm, not friends in high places, that rescued him. He was in a court-ordered drug-rehabilitation program when an outreach worker from a black church urged him to pray the psalm.

“I had never considered that the words actually applied to me,” said Loury during our interview. “I hadn’t thought hard about what the ‘valley of the shadow of death’ might mean in my own life. I hadn’t considered how the metaphor ‘anointing one’s head with oil’ translated into the balm and succor that I was able to draw on in my darkest hour.’’

Although Loury had not been to church in years, he accepted an invitation from the outreach worker to attend her African Methodist Episcopal church. It was Easter.

“So I am back in church, and there is the music and the rocking and rhythms of speech and the preaching that I knew as a youth. It was a straight-ahead sermon about the meaning of Easter . . . I could not stop crying. I wept through the entire thing. I realized, darn it, I sure need saving. I know the depths of my own sin and fallenness. I was just sort of swept away.’’

Loury was baptized one year later. Afterward, he began a process of change in his personal life and political views that included a falling out with those who had been his fellow conservatives. He is now the head of an institute on race and society at Boston University.

In a new book, Loury, who now calls himself a progressive, completes his move into the black intellectual mainstream, adopting a moderate liberal stance somewhere between the black conservatives who advocate self-reliance and the radicals calling for slavery reparations. *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality* marks a dramatic change in Loury's thinking about the causes of racial inequality. Where he formerly focused on the internal enemies that held black Americans back, he now examines the attitudes of white people and the social structures based on those attitudes that reinforce negative stereotypes of blacks.

According to Loury, some disparities make people think there is something wrong with the social order rather than the group in question. Other disparities elicit no response because people believe that they are explained by the intrinsic nature of the group in question. The latter response stigmatizes that group, he contends.

Over the past half-century, Loury notes, American culture has rejected overt white racism. But it has not addressed the deeper problem of unconscious racist attitudes based on assumptions about the intrinsic nature of blacks. These attitudes may lack a rational basis, but they have become embedded in social structures in ways that limit and predict the behavior of blacks. Thus they have deepened into stigma, he writes.

While much of the book is devoted to empirical evidence, Loury says he is also concerned by a "spiritual question" that stems from the soul-crushing effects of racial stigma. Loury explains the problem by citing racist affronts he has experienced and decisions he has faced about how to respond.

"Am I going to be resentful? Am I going to feel anger? Am I going to relive the experience over and over again? Or am I going to transcend it, look beyond it, pray for the person and sincerely do so? It seems to me that there is a similar spiritual question that confronts African-Americans, a question about whether or not in the face of stigmatism we are going to allow our souls to be so scarred and bedraggled in this undertow of negativity."

Once internalized, stigmatism can make African-Americans afraid to trust other people or themselves, Loury says.

Loury's break with his political past occurred after the publication in the mid-1990s of three books on race that he found intellectually flawed. His opposition to *The End of Racism*, by Dinesh D'Souza, a writer and scholar of Indian descent, was the most

publicized, and it led to Loury's resignation from the American Enterprise Institute. Although he personally likes D'Souza, Loury said he found the book to be full of "sneering, cartoonlike provocations" about race.

Perhaps even more important, Loury said, was his belated recognition that Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* was rife with errors and contained "sweeping conclusions based on poor science." Finally, Loury said he was also disturbed by what he regards as intellectual lapses and racist assumptions in *America in Black and White*, by Stephan Thernstrom and Abigail Thernstrom.

But there were also personal factors that bore on Loury's change. One was Uncle Alfred, a relative and patriarchal figure on the South Side of Chicago, where Loury grew up. One day, in the midst of his rocket ride as a "bad boy black neoconservative from Harvard," as Loury himself puts it, he had a visit with the uncle, who was clearly troubled. The uncle said: "I don't see us in anything you do. It's like we're the whipping boy for you, like you're exploiting your insider status as a black to give comfort to all these people who hate us. Why are you doing that?"

Loury said that though he had no answer at the time, the question stayed with him.

Loury told me that on the surface, it is easy for his critics to lampoon his shift as a case of "Mr. Personal Responsibility becomes Mr. System Blame." But he said that the change was brewing for years and that he was troubled by certain conservative positions on race, doubts which he says he did not have the courage to articulate.

And while he says that he did change his mind, Loury maintains that his new analysis of race does not contradict his earlier stances.

"I still believe in taking personal responsibility, in blacks dealing with the dsyfunctional behaviors in their communities," he said. But Loury is looking at the racial inequality "through a different lens," namely the barriers posed by the problematic thinking and behavior of whites. Loury said he was also taking into account "flaws in my earlier arguments."

That explanation does not wash with most black conservatives, some of whom have savaged Loury for his defection. In its review of *The Anatomy of Racial Inequality*, the *Wall Street Journal* accused Loury of "trashing his former black colleagues" and called the book a "turgid 226-page effort to intellectualize 'blame-whitey' explanations for the state of black America."

Some of the attacks have been painful for Loury. A professor who was present a couple of years ago when Loury and the conservative thinker and editor Norman Podhoretz met at Harvard University said he heard Podhoretz say to Loury directly, “You are no longer one of us.”

“Conservatives tend to see Glenn’s migration as being motivated by personal demons and opportunities, and I mostly agree,” said D’Souza, now a fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.

D’Souza said that it seemed as though Loury decided that it was “profitable’’ in career terms to locate himself between black conservatives and firebrand liberals like Cornel West. “Everyone is entitled to change their mind, but Glenn has not given an intelligent answer to explain himself,” said D’Souza.

Sociologist Alan Wolfe, a former colleague of Loury’s at Boston University and now the director of a Boston College institute on religion and public life, said the conservative response to Loury appears to be motivated by a variation of political correctness.

“Conservatives did a great job exposing and knocking down political correctness,” he said, “but in their reaction to Loury they have shown themselves to be as politically correct as the worst kind of leftist they once criticized.”

“My sense is that Loury’s change is authentic, and that other people respect him for it,” said Wolfe, who knows Loury well and who once taught a course with him. “I think his courage is admired by the people who count.”

Loury, who is 54 and has five children, lives in Brookline, near the campus of Boston University, to which he moved from Harvard in 1991. He said he has built “quite a good intellectual life for myself at BU” and that he was “not in a hurry to change institutions.”

When he was a neoconservative, Loury argued that characteristics attributed to race have no genetic basis. He still believes that race is, in a sense, a bogus biological category, but he now argues that race nevertheless has a socially constructed meaning that counts and counts powerfully.

In a recent article in the *New York Times*, Loury criticized those who have used the banner of privacy law to defend color-blind policies. “Whatever the racial privacy

crusaders may intend, and however desirable in the abstract their color-blind ideal may be, their campaign runs the risk of devaluing our collective and still unfinished efforts to achieve greater equality," he said.

Loury continues to attend the African Methodist Episcopal church in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston where he was baptized in 1989. While his Christian commitment does not specifically affect how he goes about his research as an economist and social scientist, he said it is "always there at a meta-level."

"I think it affects how I conduct myself, what questions I ask and what goals I am trying to achieve in my work, how I interact with others," he said in the interview. "And it's a stewardship thing. It affects me by making me think: I've been blessed with this great privilege, now what shall I do with it?"

Loury said he is less intense about his identity as a born-again Christian than he was a decade ago. Doubts have entered his mind about some key Christian beliefs, he said. While this troubles him at times, Loury also accepts that the quest for absolute certainty about one's faith is futile.

"Who is without doubt?" he said he came to realize after speaking with friends, including Richard Neuhaus, the editor of the conservative Christian journal *First Things*. "There's doubt, and then there's faith inside that doubt, and then there's doubt inside that faith inside that doubt. There's no end to it. So there's no use for you or me to be bellyaching and crying because we can't be certain about the things which really no one can be certain about. It's just a part of the deal."

Earlier this year, a profile of Loury appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* under the headline "About Face." Loury said he complained to the author about the headline, which he said carried the double meaning that he was motivated by saving "face" and by a desire to curry favor with more liberal black intellectuals.

"The implication is that here's a guy who was ostracized and got lonely and the weight of it just became too much for him, and so he changed his mind," Loury said. "Well, that's patronizing. I mean, I changed my mind, and I've got reasons for it."

Loury lamented the fact that in the minefield of academic race studies, it can be hard to reach a new conclusion without being accused of personal politics, disloyalty or worse. In fact, he is now working on a memoir about the many challenges of being a public intellectual; it's tentatively titled "Changing My Mind."

“There’s a kind of oxymoronic quality to the term public intellectual,” he said. “There’s the public. And there’s the intellectual. And they really are in conflict. What the intellectual requires is the capacity to range across possible viewpoints based on what argument and evidence suggest is the most sensible explanation—to a degree letting the chips fall where they may. What the ‘public’ part is about is intellectuals’ battles and their colleagues. There are issues of betrayal, expectation and loyality and all of that. So one finds the temptation to compromise on the intellectual side in order to keep things good on the other.”