

## **Racial Segregation Practice in a Religious Context**

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Black-white segregation, a longtime and pervasive feature of America's socio-cultural landscape, is not limited to the often discussed spheres of housing, education, and employment, but penetrates America's religious life as well. This research takes a look at the practice of racial (particularly black-white) segregation of church people in America. I propose to examine this issue within Christianity, paying particular attention to the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church in America, as one of the many Christian denominations in the nation, and because of its longstanding practice of black-white structural segregation in the US. By taking a closer look at segregation and zeroing in on SDAs (in the US), a measure of understanding of the phenomenon of black-white segregation among churchgoers in America can be gleaned as well. Before proceeding, however, it is rather poignant to clarify that while the word 'race' and variations of it are used in this paper, it is solely for the purposes of conveying a socially constructed idea,<sup>2</sup> as acknowledged in academia, and not a biological reality.

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<sup>1</sup> This research was undertaken from a sociology of religion background, and features Seventh-day Adventism as somewhat of a centerpiece, while speaking to issues of religion and 'racial' segregation within broader Christianity in the US.

<sup>2</sup> For research work on notions of 'race,' see Cleran Hollancid, *Evolution Declassified* (Detroit, MI: Gold Leaf Press, 2012).

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*Significance of Study.* The importance of this study lies in the manner in which it seeks to piece together an understanding of the phenomenon of religious black-white segregation. A paper of this nature also has implications for the wider US society, since the church remains an indispensable part of all social institutions. In other words, churchgoers make up part of the wider US society, and as such, an understanding of their social sphere including racial segregation practices and struggles with integration,<sup>3</sup> can also contribute to an understanding of interpersonal relations in the wider society.

*Theoretical Outlook.* Considering the intersection of religion and segregation, the theoretical outlook here, seen in terms of cultural toolkit theory, partially poses an explanation for the described phenomenon in conjunction with a sociopolitical, economic and historical trajectory of American religious and social life. Religion, in this discussion, can be looked upon as a values source that contributes to the formation of social meaning.<sup>4</sup> Tied to the nature of interaction between individuals, people's actions can be looked at in attaining an understanding of the construction of segregation as social reality. Based on this approach, racial segregation practices in the church can be seen in light of the way some think and act based on certain cultural tools provided by the surrounding 'culture,' but tied to feelings of identity and belonging in their social environment as well. From that standpoint, the idea is that particular religious cultural tools—i.e., points of reference wherein social meaning is developed (e.g. religious identity), are tied to the nature of interaction between individuals and used in the construction of social reality.

As one author explains, in what some refer to as Black Christianity, for example, one can see the power of church rituals or practices as cultural tools, thus enabling blacks to organize both inside and outside of the church.<sup>5</sup> For instance, the ardent use of prayer and encouragement that accentuate gatherings, along with gospel singing in secular events, illustrates the manner in which public and secular events and institutions

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<sup>3</sup> Christerson, et al., *Against All Odds: The Struggle for Racial Integration in Religious Organizations* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Miller McPherson, et al., "Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks," *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (January, 2001), 415-444.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Pattillo-McCoy, "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community," *American Sociological Review* 63/6 (December, 1998), 767-784.

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can be fused with religious themes.<sup>6</sup> In other words, affiliation also consists of interactional tools, including those with religious themes, used in forming one's identity and outlook on life. As such, the 'cultural' outlook of church people, including an understanding of God as active in earthly affairs—particularly seen in the 'black' church, as some see it, is part of what allows them to stick together inside and outside the church.<sup>7</sup> In a similar manner, Swidler<sup>8</sup> recognizes the influences of culture in shaping what she refers to as 'repertoire' or toolkit of habits and styles, which informs peoples' thought and action. This sheds light on the way in which religious practice such as black-white segregation in congregational worship takes place, as people tend to stick together, partly based on factors like—ongoing display of customs based on traditional practice. But a crucial aspect that is not to be neglected in consideration of religious black/white segregation, is the historical trajectory of racial prejudice and discrimination extended by 'whites' towards 'blacks'—inside and outside the church.

*Socio-historical Context for Religion and Racial Segregation in the U.S.*

It is helpful to understand the historical context for segregation practices, particularly between black and white churchgoers, as part of the social landscape in the US today. To a great degree that can be understood against the backdrop of a racialized mentality embedded in American social life and dating back to the days of slavery (around mid to late seventeenth century) in America. In that racial and social framework, blacks were seen as situated in a position of servitude and separated (in terms of social status) from whites, who were considered their masters.<sup>9</sup> Between that time (seventeenth century) and now, a lot has transpired to contribute to the racial segregation of congregations; and in America today, many continue their religious expression based on a tradition of separation, group practice and group coherence (engaging in customs that promote group cohesiveness, for instance). This has occurred in the face of a racialized reality (including segregated schools and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review*, 51/2 (April, 1986), 273-286.

<sup>9</sup> Referencing John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, Seventh Edition (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1994).

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neighborhood spaces, for example) pervasive in US society. Moreover, the practice of segregation is historically linked to social order in US history, whereby oppression of blacks and white privilege were essentially the norm in American society. It is in that light that issues of black marginalization and white economic dominance has also played out.<sup>10</sup> As such, in the context of racial segregation in the religious setting, socioeconomic marginalization of many blacks and the economic dominance of many whites in the general social sphere, for instance, have been reflected in the church.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the economic gap between whites and blacks has also been an acute phenomenon in church segregation as well.<sup>12</sup> This has had implications for the way in which black and white church people in the US see each other—i.e., as equals, or not.

The segregation issue can also be looked at in terms of the level of association between blacks and whites, based on some degree of a shared religious experience, since the gospel message shared by both hinges on a unity message.<sup>13</sup> In other words, one way of looking at the black-white segregation issue is from the standpoint of the gospel message itself, which does not promote segregation; and because of this, blacks and whites can find ways to associate with each other in church.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned before, however, particular customs and practices in church culture, for instance, remain an essential part of church life for some,<sup>15</sup> while others may choose to unite in church fellowship. Thus on the one hand, some have considered issues like desegregation as playing a crucial role in church—as well as the neighborhood and school, seeing that the time is “now” to address such issues, as a response is demanded from church people to act immediately and decisively.<sup>16</sup> But on the other hand, others uphold racial segregation in church, counting it more as a

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<sup>10</sup> From Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Mark Newman, *Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> James F. Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Pattillo-McCoy, 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Findlay, 1993.

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means of edification and a strengthening of the bonds of friendship for those with similar preferences.<sup>17</sup> This suggests that today, based to a degree on personal choices, many seem more interested in the immediate ‘cultural’ benefits of close-knit relationships in church – with those of like passions and ‘cultural’ habits, whereas others pursue the gospel call to unite.

*Background and Nature of Black-White Segregation in Seventh-day Adventism.* The SDA church is a Christian denomination found around the world, with a presence on all continents. This denomination is not only engaged in the spread of the gospel (Biblical teaching of Christ), but also operates major establishments such as publishing houses, and social institutions in areas such as education and the medical field.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps one of the best-known is Loma Linda University, run by the denomination, offering degrees in areas like public health, nursing, dentistry, and medicine. As a worldwide organization, the SDA church has central headquarters in Maryland, USA referred to as the General Conference (GC) of Seventh-day Adventists.<sup>19</sup>

The church has an organizational structure, beginning with a number of churches in a specific area joining together and administered by a local conference. A number of local conferences in turn are organized under a union conference; a number of union conferences are organized under a division, and all the world divisions come under one central head—the General Conference. The United States, Canada and Bermuda, for example, make up one division—the North American Division, which is one of thirteen divisions overseeing the SDA world church.<sup>20</sup> It is in this same North American Division that we find the church organization structurally segregated along a black-white divide.<sup>21</sup>

Structural segregation, here, refers to that which occurs at the local (SDA) church (congregation) level through to the local conference (administrative) level in the U.S. For example, in Michigan a ‘white’

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<sup>17</sup> In Patillo-McCoy.

<sup>18</sup> Gary Land, *Historical Dictionary of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Don F. Neufeld, ed., “Regional Department and Conferences,” *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Vol. 10 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1966).

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(Caucasian) SDA church falls under the administration of a ‘white’ conference, and a ‘black’ (African American or other blacks) SDA church falls under the administration of a ‘black’ (or regional) conference. That is not to say that blacks will not attend a white SDA church and vice versa (whether or not they’re in the minority). But there are predominantly white and predominantly black churches within this institutional framework; a framework which Adventists are still struggling with to this day.<sup>22</sup> Part of the reason for this is that black-white separation in the church setting and leadership (only up to the local conference level) actually mirrors the milieu of early nineteenth century American society, in which Seventh-day Adventism was born. In other words, issues of white-black racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation in the wider American society of the early nineteenth century influenced the church setting as well.<sup>23</sup> It is from that backdrop that SDAs (in the US) later developed separate conferences, beginning with a ‘Negro Department’ around 1910, which later worked its way to full blown black-white segregation (up to local conference level).

As such, the pressures of racial tension and separation in the wider society is seen to have seeped into the church.<sup>24</sup> This pattern of segregation, however, does not negate interaction between blacks and whites at both congregational and local conference levels. This is seen, for example, at the union conference level (as mentioned earlier) which is above the local conference level. That is the case since administrative meetings at the union conference level bring both black and white personnel together, from various local conferences. Thus, the point is reiterated here that black-white segregation does not permeate all levels of the Seventh-day Adventist church structure, nor is segregation (up to the local conference level) an absolute barrier to black-white interaction. In other words, it is still up to blacks in local areas whether or not they attend white SDA churches, and vice versa for whites, even if the conference administrative structure remains divided.

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<sup>22</sup> See online reference for: ‘Separate Black and White Conferences– Part I’—referring to the SDA quandary of what to do with its ‘racially’ segregated conference system in North America, <http://www.drpipim.org/church-racism-contemporaryissues-51/97-separate-black-and-white-conferences-part-1.html> (accessed 12/13/12).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ellen White, *Testimonies For the Church*, Vol. 9 (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948).

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The current black-white separation at the congregational level, then, is due, to a degree, to SDA member preferences. As Christerson, et al.<sup>25</sup> show, due to a wide range of choices and the freedom associated with those choices, it is not surprising that religious organizations are seen as the most segregated institutions in US society. Moreover, some also choose to be in a religious setting where they feel most comfortable with those around them.<sup>26</sup> In looking at what is referred to as black church culture, for instance, it has been pointed out that Black Christianity connects to a particular way of life that extends outside the church walls.<sup>27</sup> In other words, it has proven to be a source of power, wherever blacks seek God's will and respond to His leading.<sup>28</sup> For many church people, then, choice of church attendance or affiliation is also specifically linked to identity, which entails identifying with members of the same background and of like interests, while at the same time feeling a sense of belonging. While that may be the case, it is crucial to underscore and keep in mind that clearly, there are socio-historical factors and political indicators that have ravished the SDA ecclesiastical structure (since the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and have influenced the persistent racial division in the church.

### **Segregation Practice and Religion**

Research aiming at an understanding of the intersection of religious practice and segregation is rather informative and comes to bear on this current study; much of which sheds light on the ways in which segregation has played out in America with particular reference to black and white church people. In that regard, religion is seen as part of and mimicking aspects of the broader social life as well. As one author posits, religion is understood as part of society as a whole and as such, churchgoers are not immune to the society around them.<sup>29</sup> This means that in American society, for example, racial segregation is a real phenomenon which is also reflected in the church and the lives of

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<sup>25</sup> Christerson, et al., 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Patillo-McCoy, 1998.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

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churchgoers.<sup>30</sup> In Gordon Allport's view, a link is seen between social meaning and religious racial segregation in the way religion finds itself tailored to the nationalistic, class and ethnic cleavages and outlooks, that sustain the prevailing social order.<sup>31</sup> Thus, racial segregation in the wider society can be seen playing out in like fashion within the halls of religion, seeing that religious practice reflects its wider milieu. As Allport sees it, this is understood as every congregation, more or less, being an assemblage of likeminded people, representing the ethnic, class and racial cleavages of society, over and beyond denominational cleavages.<sup>32</sup> This is actually a very salient point, seeing that factors such as skin color and even class can influence some (in religious circles as well) to coalesce around each other, at the exclusion of others. From that standpoint, churchgoing whites, for instance, find common ground among whites, and vice versa for blacks, mimicking the racial cleavage of the broader society. This reinforces the point that understanding the church, along with the practice of segregation, becomes inextricably linked to an apprehension of practices and patterns which are permissible (or present) in the wider society.

As it relates to religion and racial segregation, works such as Dobratz<sup>33</sup> speak to the issue of white racial identity, for example, including the role of religion in forming or solidifying such identity. As such, while notions of ethnicity form a major part of identity for some, religion also plays a role in terms of forming part of one's heritage;<sup>34</sup> i.e., the way one was raised and traditional practices upheld. Religion itself, from that angle, cannot be ruled out of social life, but rather, has become a mainstay in social affairs particularly since the church and society inhabit the same space. In this regard, many also look to religion as a coalescing force around which their social (and spiritual) lives find meaning, direction and purpose. Dobratz<sup>35</sup> zeroes in on the role of varying religious views as they intersect attitudes of white separatism or

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<sup>30</sup> Findlay, 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Gordon W. Allport, "The Religious Context of Prejudice," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 5/3 (Autumn, 1966), 447-457.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Betty Dobratz, "The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racialist Movement," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 40/2 (June, 2001), 287-301.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



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white racialists, as well. This is seen in the manner in which some regard religion not merely in terms of spirituality, but also in terms of a segregated identity. This means, for instance, that one can find notions of whiteness and religious affiliation coincide with white socioeconomic privilege as well.

Furthermore, Dobratz not only shows how religion can be a crucial defining characteristic in ethnic identity,<sup>36</sup> but also a rallying point in social life. A key point here is that religion – as identity, is also wrapped up in the everyday experience of the individual. This tells of the way in which identity, religion, and upbringing, along with social interests can become enmeshed in the lived experience of people.<sup>37</sup> Another crucial point here is that when it comes to issues of segregation, religion or the practice of religion takes on the form of a shield, in a sense, as tied to custom and social milieu.<sup>38</sup> In other words, one's ties to racial segregation practice in the religious context can also be seen as linked to their social milieu—to include the justification or keeping of certain practices—as in the broader mentality of segregation, for example.

Taken from a slightly different perspective, Allport has more to say about the way in which religion intersects the cultural practices and mentality of the wider society. In stating his case, however, Allport<sup>39</sup> makes the point that religion can become the focus of prejudice since it usually stands for more than just faith; i.e., in the manner in which it is tied to the cultural milieu. In other words, though there may be spiritual ideals in a churchgoer's outlook on life, such outlook can also become secularized by taking on cultural functions; i.e. certain cultural practices (and prejudices) of the wider society.<sup>40</sup> This reiterates the point that the church, being part of the wider society in which it is situated, thereby patterns some of the same customs and practices of the immediate culture surrounding it, including segregation and separatist attitudes. It is from that backdrop that Allport adds, “when religious distinctions are made to do double duty, the grounds for prejudice are laid.”<sup>41</sup> That is to say, in

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> G. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1979).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 446.

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Allport's view, religious affiliation, cultural habit and cultural milieu can coalesce, for instance, and reflect practices like that of black-white racial segregation along with its related issues (like certain attitudes and prejudices) evident in the wider society.

This refrain of religion, cultural milieu and segregation is seen elsewhere, in a piece edited by Glenn Feldman. Accordingly, this work reveals that divine blessings have even been evoked among some Baptist leaders in the South, for instance, in sanctioning racial segregation, particularly between blacks and whites.<sup>42</sup> From that standpoint, segregation in the religious setting is seen with respect to relationship between the divine and human. This speaks to the expansion and daring nature of the segregation phenomenon, even surpassing the human realm. Readily expressing such segregation sentiments, and resounding in overtones, it has been clearly stated, "That which God hath put asunder, let not man attempt to join."<sup>43</sup> This is a very acrimonious statement and one mischaracterizing the very character of God. Such an audacious and biased statement lucidly expresses the attitude, as some see it, that not only should blacks and whites remain separate in church, but that such sentiments are seen as sanctioned by God Himself; from the very throne of God, if you please. This is painting the picture of a racist God; one that is prompt to justify the prejudices of some, just because they think so.

That such is the case is also seen in the way in which racial division has been looked at by some in America; i.e., racial segregation as within the norms of society.<sup>44</sup> Such thinking and mannerisms, while evolving from America's socio-historical trajectory of segregation, are interpreted and understood by some to be part of a framework of adaptation. Nonetheless, either way, the practice of religious racial segregation is not only a glowing reality among SDAs and other denominations, but is given strong endorsement by some who consider it a God-given mandate. Thus, many seem to be caught between two worlds—the one which references notions of "cultural" solidarity in religious worship, marked by black-white hyper segregation—seen as an act of God (for

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<sup>42</sup> In Glenn Feldman ed., *Politics and Religion in the White South* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Massey and Denton, 1993.

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some) and experienced as the norm, because everyone else seem to be following this trend; and the other world is one characterized by an urgent call to unity—‘brown,’ ‘black,’ ‘white,’ all God’s children.

Taking a look, however, at the notion of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘racial’ diversity in religious practice, Jenkins<sup>45</sup> notes that the formation of small ‘racially’ or ‘ethnically’ mixed groups appear to be a factor in the construction and maintenance of congregational life. Although not in a major way, researchers like Jenkins recognize some shift towards ‘racially’ diverse congregations apart from all-white and all-black churches, for instance. This contributes to what Jenkins identifies as “intimate diversity,” seen as a “valuable and rising commodity in our U.S. religious economy.”<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, on this same token, McPherson et al. offer a critical look at the manner in which groups, whether religious or not, tend to stick together, particularly from a ‘racial’ and social network standpoint.<sup>47</sup> The idea is that many tend to stick together on a ‘racial’ (i.e., skin color/physical characteristics) basis, forming a social network (i.e., connecting with those sharing similar interests) among themselves in the process. They live in that manner, attempting to maintain a sense of (racial) continuity and friendship.

Elaborating on the nature of social networks, McPherson, et al., posit that people remain close-knit, based on the type of significant contact they have with others like themselves, including similar ‘racial’ contact.<sup>48</sup> In that sense, similarity tends to breed togetherness. This has implications for the way in which similarity or what the authors call “homophily”—meaning ‘love of the same,’ limit the social worlds of people, in terms of having powerful implications for the information received and the interaction experienced.<sup>49</sup> Here, the limitation to the social worlds of people is thus understood on the basis of social interaction linked to factors such as ‘racial’ biases, friendship and similar interests. From that standpoint, the nature of the experienced interaction and the information transmitted among members of a network, impact

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<sup>45</sup> Kathleen E. Jenkins, “Intimate Diversity: The Presentation of Multiculturalism and Multiracialism in a High-Boundary Religious Movement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42/3 (September, 2003), 393-409.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 393.

<sup>47</sup> McPherson, et al., 2001.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

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the way in which the individual sees the world. ‘Racial’ segregation, in that sense, is seen as likelihood in the religious setting, as an attempt is made by some to engender communities of sameness.

As a Christian denomination, the attendance of whites in white SDA churches and blacks in black SDA churches can be understood in a similar light; i.e., segregation based on ‘cultural’ practice and notions of group identity. Again this is an attempt to engender communities of sameness, also connected to factors such as preference for particular worship or preaching styles. But to be sure, the actual ‘racial’ segregation practice within Adventism (in both church and school, for instance) has been buttressed by racial prejudice, and in many cases discrimination (against blacks), within the ‘racial’ segregation structural outlook of black/white Adventism. Given those factors, as a consequence, many SDAs (blacks, for example) may advocate black-white unity while others may not, as segregation for many is seen as a means of upholding the maintenance of ‘homophily.’<sup>50</sup>

Taking this a step further, black/white segregation is also understood by some in relation to the way God is perceived via particular ‘cultural’ reckoning; for example, ‘black’ worship and ‘white’ worship may invoke God for various reasons—i.e., one may see God as deliverer, for instance, whereas the other may tend to see God more as sustainer. Along a related line of thought, the point has been made that in connection with the notion of group identity, shaped by racial exclusivity, “Homophily in race and ethnicity creates the strongest divides in our personal environments.”<sup>51</sup> A conspicuous point like this is important in understanding how similarity ties, such as that involving ‘racial’ identity, are stronger than ties between nonsimilar individuals, which also helps in setting the stage for local niches within social space. Such a view, coupled with what has already been shown here in terms of cultural identity and the socio-religious history of prejudice and segregation, helps in gaining insight into the nature of the segregation patterns among churches, and the SDA church in particular.

On this trend of thought regarding ‘racial’ exclusivity, Martin Katz offers some insight into the motive for racial exclusiveness. In a study of a group of SDA high-school students, with regards to attitudes towards

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<sup>50</sup> Referencing notion of ‘love of the same.’

<sup>51</sup> McPherson, et al., p. 415.

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blacks, Katz shows how the desire for acceptance can lead members of a racial group to be intolerant to others.<sup>52</sup> The idea is that to be part of a particular group, one may be willing to put on behaviors that seem to reinforce attachment to the group. This also ties in with the point of adherence to cultural preference, customs and identity. This is seen in the way that the white students in Katz's study, for example, were seen as being influenced by their association with whites.<sup>53</sup> Association is another way of thinking about the term 'homophily' as seen above. This connects also with the idea of similarity, so that the more time one spends with a group seeing her/himself as similar to other group members while learning their customs and behavior, the more s/he may become influenced by the group's way of thinking and acting. Thus, it is not farfetched to see how the concept of *homophily* and the notion of *association* or 'racial' association can also be linked to racial segregation in a religious context.

Sharing insight on the nature and consequences of segregation, Massey and Denton, however, show how racial (particularly black-white) segregation has been the source of many social problems, including the maintenance of black poverty and the creation of a black underclass.<sup>54</sup> This is an argument telling of the social impact and implications of racial segregation. It shows how black-white segregation in America can perpetuate black poverty, whether inside or outside the church. Along the same lines, it was Edgell and Tranby who made the point that the pervasive outlook of high socioeconomic status among whites versus low socioeconomic status among blacks (in the U.S.) on average, suggests that wealth is disproportionately concentrated in the hands of whites.<sup>55</sup> But despite any economic disadvantage that may be present, many blacks are still willing to be segregated in church, since their 'church-cultural' affinity is not influenced by mere economics alone, but by the very group practices and traditions of separateness that have evolved through generations. In other words, segregation in church for many seems to be

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<sup>52</sup> Martin R. Katz, "A Hypothesis on Anti-Negro Prejudice," *American Journal of Sociology*, 53/2 (September, 1947), 100-104.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Massey and Denton, 1993.

<sup>55</sup> Penny Edgell and Eric Tranby, "Religious Influences on Understandings of Racial Inequality in the United States," *Social Problems*, 54/2 (May, 2007), 263-288.

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more in line with the capitalization of some sort of shared historical identity.

In looking at contributing factors to religion and segregation, although touched on slightly, some emphasis should be placed on the historical connection with slavery. Particularly from a religious standpoint, it is shown that (southern) slaveholders not merely persisted in the defense of slavery, but consciously regarded it as necessary in the social order.<sup>56</sup> It is in that mode of thinking that racial segregation was later advanced (by blacks) and justified in the religious context, seeing that blacks were not given the full freedoms to worship how they chose to, or not allowed to participate in worship and leading church roles like whites were. Moreover, the defenders of slavery regarded such an institution (i.e., slavery) as a strong bulwark against the decaying and un-Christian impact of industrial capitalism.<sup>57</sup> Thus, early on in American history, a justification for slavery in conjunction with a form of black-white segregation in church (i.e., still segregated in the same church building) was heavily pursued by many whites; but that was still in keeping with the oppression of blacks and the subjugation of blacks in church roles (as well as in the wider society). As such, church segregation, which developed later on (late nineteenth and twentieth centuries), was advocated by blacks who saw that increasing autonomy in religious practice was better suited to addressing their social life and conditions.<sup>58</sup> This has come to influence the longstanding custom of black-white segregation also seen in religious practice today. Furthermore, today, the black church with a strong tradition of addressing social ills and injustice, is still largely seen as a rallying point and the epicenter (particularly within the black community) of the call for social justice and progress in America.

Historically, though, black-white segregation in American society as well as the church has also been countered. One of the ways in which this was accomplished is through local publication. For example, there was a magazine publication featuring two preschoolers—one white and

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<sup>56</sup> Refer to crucial work on the topic by: Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, "The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholder's World View," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 55/2 (Summer, 1987), 211-233; and Franklin and Moss, 1994.

<sup>57</sup> Genovese and Fox-Genovese, 1987.

<sup>58</sup> Franklin and Moss, 1994.

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one black girl who were friends, but had to separate into Jim Crow carriages on a train when it reached the South. As the mother of the black preschooler tried to explain the mentality and system of segregation which required them to move into an inferior carriage, the child became perplexed.<sup>59</sup> By illustrating the harmful and demeaning effects of segregation, such publications tended to appeal not only to reason and logic but to the emotive domain as well.

Taken from another angle, considerations on the justification of religious black-white segregation have played out in the way the battles over race and civil rights have been waged in US society;<sup>60</sup> and also in the manner in which civil rights leaders' appeals to (southern) racists and segregationists have been ignored.<sup>61</sup> In other words, this speaks of resistance to racial integration in the religious context. It shows how racial ideology and segregation attitudes, along with the actual practice of racial separation in church worship can become reified. Thus, racial segregation among the religious and in the social system has been perpetuated, as segregationists have attempted to justify the racialization of society not just 'culturally,' but politically and intellectually as well.<sup>62</sup>

Newman, for example, shows how in the Civil Rights era around the 1950s and 1960s, there was a struggle against southern white resistance to desegregation;<sup>63</sup> and this was evident in both church and school arenas. At that point, the biblical defense of segregation was challenged and refuted in laying the path for desegregation, as black-white integration in church as well as in society was advocated.<sup>64</sup> This speaks to the nature and level to which segregation became widespread and accepted in the church, as it was pervasive in society. In that atmosphere, as a pivotal point of discussion, an appeal was made to those inside and outside the church, not only for blacks to be granted equal facilities and

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<sup>59</sup> In Mark Newman's piece—*Getting Right with God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation*, 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Harvey, *Religion, Race, and the Right in the South, 1945-1990*. In Glen Feldman ed., *Politics and Religion in the White South* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 101-123.

<sup>61</sup> David L. Chappell, "Religious Ideas of the Segregationists," *Journal of American Studies*, 32/2 (August, 1998), 237-262.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Newman, 2001.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

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justice, but courtesy and respect as well.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the church was marked as a point of contention in the discussion on racial integration in US society, in terms of equality and justice issues.

In other religious circles such as within American Catholicism<sup>66</sup> and among Protestants such as United Presbyterian Church-USA and United Church of Christ,<sup>67</sup> there have been calls to address the ills of black-white segregation, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. Here, the call was seen as a matter of addressing inconsistencies between social or church segregation practice and the gospel. This is in particular reference to matters of social equality and justice as mentioned above.

Today, as a pervasive (North American) practice, SDA members and the church administrative structure advance ‘segregationism’ (seen by some as condoned by the General Conference), as they continue to congregate with others like themselves. Historically, however, among American SDAs the pattern of segregation along black-white racial lines,<sup>68</sup> also coincided with the general outlook of racial struggles and injustices that have engulfed US social and political life. Black-white structural segregation at the regional administrative and local (SDA) church levels, have thus been established in conjunction with the historical trajectory of US institutionalized racism.<sup>69</sup>

In the past, nonetheless, there have been challenges to segregation within American Seventh-day Adventism. An example of the challenges of structural black-white segregation in American Seventh-day Adventism can be seen in the manner in which students attempted to have their voices heard at a ‘black’ college within the denomination. This experience involved organized demonstrations by students of Oakwood College (American SDA only historically ‘black’ college) over civil rights and social injustices.<sup>70</sup> The attempt here, going back to around the early to mid-twentieth century, was to combat racially

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> See McGreevy, 1996.

<sup>67</sup> See Findlay, 1993.

<sup>68</sup> In Neufeld, 1966.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Holly Fisher, “Oakwood College Students’ Quest for Social Justice Before and During the Civil Rights Era,” *The Journal of African American History*, 88/2 (Spring, 2003), 110-125.



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discriminatory practices both inside and outside of the denomination.<sup>71</sup> Thus, segregation and racial tensions were brought into the spotlight (as in this example) in the denomination's past. This actually goes further back and is linked to the opposition to slavery by white SDA leaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century sensitive era of racial tensions; but in that same breath those same leaders embraced the practices of segregation and doctrines of white racial superiority, pervasive in the post-Reconstruction period.<sup>72</sup>

In the same way, referring to the American black Adventist college, Peterson<sup>73</sup> attempts to issue a rationale on Seventh-day Adventism and 'race' relations. This is seen in the way he describes the SDA segregation issue, particularly in terms of the historical development of the only SDA (American) black college—Oakwood College. With students from both inside and outside of the US attending this college, and with a handful of whites there as well, Peterson's piece shows how Adventist education zeroes in on the home, the school and the church to work hand in hand in training the youth for spiritual matters. As such, the philosophy upon which the SDA educational system is built points to the idea that true education means more than pursuing just a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the current life. Further, in establishing black schools such as Oakwood College as a 'Negro college,' the idea was that blacks should be trained as well as whites in their own sphere of influence,<sup>74</sup> to train and develop leaders for the service of God and the church.

Note here the term, 'sphere of influence' used in a type of cause and effect relationship—i.e., segregation used to justify the end or effect of segregated spiritual activity and outcome. This, in both a telling and chilling sense, proclaims that the ends justify the means; i.e., in the broader (American) SDA experience, segregation is deemed as justifiable by many, if suited toward a particular end goal. What's critical to note here also is that Peterson, also writing to the tune of the times (around the 1960s' Civil Rights era), recognized, in his view, the legitimacy of a color line even in the training of black and white students, as part of a

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> F. L. Peterson, "Why the Seventh-day Adventist Church Established and Maintains a Negro College (and Schools for Negroes Below College Grade)," *The Journal of Negro Education*, 29/3 (Summer, 1960), 284-288.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

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thrust to develop leaders for church service. But many have questioned this type of legitimacy, placing a type of guilt and troubled conscience as to whether or not such (segregated) decisions are actually sanctioned by God. In other words, does church leadership, members or anyone for that matter, assume that God sanctions segregation practices because a board or committee approves it? Some may argue that, in fact, rather than serving God, Seventh-day Adventists are really serving themselves, when due to social circumstances they fall prey to divisive techniques, which seem to make life easier.

#### **Conclusion**

Through it all, as seen in this paper, black-white segregation in the religious context and as seen in the SDA church is something that has been filled with negative 'racial' overtones. Today, while some argue for church 'racial' segregation based on personal preference, referencing factors like worship style, besides others as discussed in this paper, a reflexive mood and dark cloud still hangs over the church like an unrelenting ghost. Further, in America, racial segregation practices in the religious context arose out of a social milieu in which racial prejudice, subjugation, separation and discrimination were not only rampant but overt and accepted as well. That milieu made its way into the (SDA) church.

Today, as the clock ticks, this struggle not only ensues, but continues to define Seventh-day Adventism; this sore spot in the soul of the Adventist Church. The divisive shackles that bind and weigh down Seventh-day Adventism are relentless and can be unforgiving if left unchecked. While this paper made particular reference to the American SDA church, the degree to which there is, or has been a link (or some commonality) between racial segregation practices and US religious groups, in general, has also been implicit. Hence the church and society lives on in a bubble—with a troubled soul, intertwining this worldly and the otherworldly, where characteristics between the secular (sometimes blazing the path for the spiritual) and the spiritual seem forever blurred.

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