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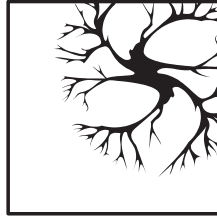
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Comparative Approaches to the Study
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This essay was written with essentially four goals in mind. First, to briefly explain the connection between my own experiences with white supremacy in the American South and my comparative approach to research and scholarship on the United States and South Africa. Second, to highlight George M. Fredrickson's contributions to a couple of major comparative studies of race relations in the United States and South Africa by his former students, myself and James T. Campbell. Third, to identify what might be considered weaknesses in Fredrickson's studies. Finally, to discuss what religious scholars and liberation theologians can learn from Fredrickson's works in comparative history, despite their limitations.

My own interest in race relations in the United States and South Africa extends back to the 1960s, when I was growing up and attending segregated schools in the Alabama "blackbelt." Having been born there in the late 1940s, I saw and experienced racial apartheid in all of its ugly and painful dimensions (e.g., the segregated facilities, the humiliating "white" and "colored" signs, physical attacks against blacks, etc.). In the course of my participation in student demonstrations in Camden and Talladega, Alabama, in the late 1960s, I became familiar with Malcolm X's occasional comments on the politics of race in the United States and South Africa, and this, in addition to my own personal life under Jim Crow, contributed to an emerging interest in how white supremacist values and institutions in the two societies impacted the general quality of life for persons of African descent. In the 1970s and 1980s, my interest along these lines grew substantially as I was exposed to the flaming rhetoric of black nationalists, Gil Scott Herron's deeply moving song on Johannesburg, and the late Martin Luther King Jr.'s

brilliant and poignant statements on the parallels between Southern Jim Crow and South African apartheid.

Extensive training at the seminary and university levels led me to reflect on the problem of race in the United States and South Africa in entirely new ways. The conviction that there were sharp and disturbing similarities between the systems of racial separatism in the two countries, especially from the standpoint of their sheer brutality and impact on the black psyche, was almost routinely presented and shared by my African-American classmates at Colgate-Rochester/Bexley Hall/Crozer Seminaries in New York in the early 1970s. Having learned much about racism in both the South and the North, I generally concurred, but my own perspective on how I might treat the subject in my writings benefited immensely from my exposure in the late 1970s to the distinguished historian George M. Fredrickson at Northwestern University. While pursuing the Ph.D. in religious history at Northwestern, I had courses with Fredrickson, one of which focused on the American South. His rich and informative lectures in that class offered some indications of the direction he would later take in his comparative studies in black-white relations in the southern United States and South Africa. Thus, when his book, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History*, first appeared in 1981, I could read him with relative ease, and without any sense of being overwhelmed intellectually and spiritually.

Influenced by the kind of questions and insights raised by Frank Tannenbaum and other scholars in comparative studies of slavery and race relations in Latin America and the United States, Fredrickson's *White Supremacy* is clearly a groundbreaking work in comparative history. It shares that distinction with Howard Lamar's and Leonard Thompson's *Frontier in History: North America and South Africa Compared* (1981), and with John W. Cell's *Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (1982). *White Supremacy* reveals similarities and differences in the origin and expression of white supremacy in the two countries. Fredrickson skillfully explores the social, political, economic, and ideological components that determined the structure of interpersonal and inter-group relations in the two societies, thus establishing a method and preparing the ground for later works on the subject.

White Supremacy is also significant in other respects. It challenges, albeit indirectly, the widely held notion, advanced as early as 1961 by scholars as reputable as Harold Courlander, that the struggle of black South Africans was categorically different from that of unlettered blacks in the rural counties of the southern United States. Moreover, *White Supremacy* sparked ferment and debate in fields as diverse as sociology, anthropology, political science, and religion. With the appearance of this landmark work, scholars were provided a standard by which to compare and contrast a whole range of values and practices relative to race in the American and South African settings.

The same might be said of Fredrickson's other award-winning work, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa*, published in 1995. A companion volume to *White Supremacy*, *Black Liberation* explains how blacks in the two countries responded to the challenge of white supremacy in ideological terms. It is really a book about black resistance to Jim Crow and apartheid, one that takes into account parallel developments in the politics of black peoples, and also the extent to which black leaders (i.e., nationalists, pan-Africanists, integrationists, etc.) in

the two nations viewed each other and the ties between their struggles and those of people of African descent across the globe. Interestingly enough, Fredrickson's brief but interesting references to Martin Luther King Jr.'s anti-apartheid views in *Black Liberation* echoed my much more extensive treatment of this subject in *Toward the Beloved Community: Martin Luther King, Jr. and South Africa*, a work which was also issued in published form in 1995.

The significance of Fredrickson's contribution to comparative history should be assessed not only in terms of the many awards (The Ralph Waldo Emerson Prize, The Merle Curti Award, etc.) he has received, but also from the standpoint of his influence on a number of other major works on the United States and South Africa. Obviously, Fredrickson has greatly influenced a whole generation of historians, especially those who have sought to understand the two countries within the context of some comparative perspective. I read *White Supremacy* in early 1983, as I was gathering documents for my own comparative essays on the Civil Rights Movement in the American South and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Many of the questions around which I framed my research and ideas were inspired by my reading of Fredrickson's book. In January 1986, Fredrickson gave a lecture at Vanderbilt University on the political foundations and implications of white supremacy, and I, in my second year in Vanderbilt's Department of Religious Studies at the time, left the presentation with a greater determination to move beyond the short essays I had written to produce a major work on Martin Luther King Jr., the Southern Civil Rights Movement, and the black South African crusade against apartheid. That effort resulted in the aforementioned work, *Toward the Beloved Community*.

Unfortunately, I did not have the chance to read Fredrickson's book, *Black Liberation*, before my own volume was published. As mentioned previously, both appeared in the same year, but, because Fredrickson shared parts of what would become *Black Liberation* in his 1986 lecture at Vanderbilt, I still feel that I benefited from the work in profound ways. Of particular importance for me on that occasion were his remarks on the political aspect of white supremacy in South Africa, or the role of the state in establishing and maintaining racial domination. Fredrickson also had much to say in that lecture about racial, tribal, and class divisions, and about how nonviolent resistance, which had worked in the American South in the 1950s and 1960s, had proven ineffectual and even suicidal in the South African context. He concluded that South Africa was on the verge of a classic revolutionary situation, noting that he found insufficient evidence to sustain a more optimistic prognosis. I shared Fredrickson's pessimism at that time, if I might call it that, and his insights into the futility of nonviolent struggle in South Africa informed much of my own discussion of King's relevance for South Africa in the 1980s in *Toward the Beloved Community*.

I followed Fredrickson's statements on South Africa closely after the Vanderbilt lecture. I sensed a shift in his outlook with the freeing of Nelson Mandela in February 1990, and the subsequent easing up of government repression in South Africa. Fredrickson then began to declare that nonviolent protest in South Africa was possible; that this situation made the U.S. Civil Rights Movement more relevant. Needless to say, I found this shifting perspective quite intriguing and convincing, and it influenced the flow of the discussion in chapters five and six of my *Toward the Beloved Community*, which

explore the significance of King's views on nonviolence and the communitarian ideal for South Africans in the 1990s and beyond.

While not as abundantly evident, Fredrickson's influence on the work of historian James T. Campbell, another of his former students, is well worth noting. Campbell's dissertation on the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in America and South Africa, which was directed by Fredrickson at Stanford University, was published in 1995, the very same year that Fredrickson's *Black Liberation* and my *Toward the Beloved Community* were issued. Published under the title *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, Campbell's book traces developments in the AME Church in the two countries from the nineteenth century to the latter part of the twentieth century. Much attention is given to the interactions between African Americans and black South Africans, the comparisons they drew between their socio-political situations, their sense of the bonds and obligations that existed between them, and the unique or fresh ways in which they perceived, confronted, and sought to transform their worlds. Fredrickson's influence appears to be most evident at those points where Campbell explores the transatlantic appeal of black religious nationalism, especially Ethiopianism, a topic Fredrickson treats at some length in *Black Liberation*.

Although Fredrickson's comparative works have been greeted with universal acclaim, and deservedly so, there are points at which he is open to critique. While I appreciate the references to Martin Luther King Jr.'s outspokenness on South Africa in the 1960s in *Black Liberation*, some attention to how figures like King, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Albert J. Luthuli figured into the debates concerning violence, nonviolence, and community over the next two or three decades would have added to the appeal of the book. We know from our reading of black South African leaders like Bishop Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak that King was not irrelevant to such discussions, and nor were Gandhi and Luthuli. The same might be said of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, James Cone, and other voices in the Black Power Movement. Interestingly enough, Fredrickson alludes to the influence of Malcolm, Carmichael, Cleaver, Cone, and other Black Power advocates on the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa in the 1970s, but to what extent, if at all, did these voices continue to impact the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s? How were Jesse Jackson, Leon Sullivan, and other African-American leaders, who worked with King and the Civil Rights Movement, and who were inspired by the rhetoric of Black Power, impacted by the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa? How did they influence the South African crusade? Given Fredrickson's interest in the transatlantic web of influences, or the connections between the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements, answers to these and other questions would not have been antithetical to the focus of *Black Liberation*.

Fredrickson's discussion of the political and economic foundations of white supremacy in the United States and South Africa does not adequately address sexism and the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, problems that are inextricably linked to issues of race, class, poverty, and violence. In *Black Liberation*, there are fleeting references to black South African women and their resistance to Pass Laws in the 1950s, and a couple of points are made regarding the efforts of the Women's League and the interracial Federation of South African Women to attract attention to women's concerns and to

coordinate women's protest activities. But more attention should have been given to the multitude of problems and challenges confronting black women in the United States and South Africa, because, ultimately, the structures of white supremacy in both contexts cannot be truly eliminated without serious attention to these matters. But let me hasten to add that Fredrickson is not alone when it comes to the neglect of women's issues in comparative treatments of America and South Africa. The problem exists across the spectrum of disciplines among scholars, but there is a sense in which it is inexcusable, especially given the widespread appeal of the women's liberation movement among scholars over the last three decades. This explains my own attempt, however inadequate, to do justice to sexism and the struggles of black American and South African women in *Toward the Beloved Community*. Something might also be learned on this subject from Campbell's *Songs of Zion*, for he highlights the careers of Fanny Jackson Coppin and other women who moved between the two countries, always having some impact on the religious, social, and political arenas in which they found themselves.

Let me also say that I do not share Fredrickson's optimism regarding the possibility of the achievement of racial justice and equality in the United States in the not too distant future. His *White Supremacy* and *Black Liberation* clearly show that he is cautiously optimistic about South Africa, but not the United States. With the resurgence of raw racism, the increasing assault on the poor and programs affecting the poor, and the sharp increase in hate groups and hate crimes against marginalized people, it is most difficult to uncritically embrace Fredrickson's optimistic prognosis. The powerful resurgence of right wing politics and religion in the United States is threatening gains already made in the area of racial justice and equality. In the aftermath of Katrina, who can say with certainty what will happen? Although blacks control the structures of politics in South Africa, the same question might be raised, because there has been no radical redistribution of economic power and resources in the interest of black citizens and other peoples of color.

Even so, religious scholars and theologians have much to learn from Fredrickson's superb and highly disciplined scholarship. First, Fredrickson's deliberate rejection of the term "racism" and preference for the term "white supremacy" is highly instructive. Fredrickson reminds us that the term "racism" is too ambiguous and loaded to effectively describe the oppressive structures of the United States and South Africa; that it has assumed a veneer of the pejorative and moralistic that makes its precise meanings virtually impossible to capture. The term "white supremacy," according to Fredrickson, is much more descriptive of the attitudes, ideologies, institutions, and policies that have long characterized forms of white European dominance over "nonwhite" peoples. African-American religious scholars and liberation theologians have become too attached to the term "racism," and the thinking of black South African church leaders and liberation theologians has long been too fixed on the term "apartheid." Unfortunately, this is contributing to what some critics view as a confusion or an identity crisis in black liberation theology in both contexts.

Also, Fredrickson engages in the kind of social and economic analyses that are missing in the works of religious scholars and liberation theologians. He takes class divisions seriously, and does not avoid Marxism as a tool for social and economic analysis. Strangely, this has not been the case with too many religious scholars and liberation theologians in both the United States and South Africa. In this age of globalization, too

many bless monopoly capitalism while eagerly embracing its profit motive and its values of materialism, individualism, and unscrupulous competition. Fredrickson has much to say to black religious thinkers and liberation theologians as they move from the theoretical to the practical in their calls for the elimination of racially and economically oppressive structures.

Clearly, scholars in religion and liberation theologians have not been grounded in the kind of comparative scholarship that Fredrickson and other scholars have provided. This accounts in part for a deficiency in the scholarship on contemporary religion and liberation theology in both the United States and South Africa. There are no serious references to the works of Fredrickson and other comparative historians, even in volumes like Josiah U. Young's *Black and African Theologies: Siblings or Distant Cousins* (1986) and Dwight N. Hopkins' *Black Theology in the USA and South Africa: Politics, Culture, and Liberation* (1989). Historians provide records of the many human experiences and events upon which religious scholars and liberation theologians must reflect, and any system of religious ethics and liberation thought devoid of a thorough grounding in history cannot meet the highest standards of intellectual vitality and integrity.

In conclusion, Fredrickson's work demonstrates the power and fruitfulness of comparative methodology when it is applied to the American and South African contexts. So much of Fredrickson's illustrious and prolific scholarly career is rooted in the comparative study of racial domination. I am indebted so much to him, and he has set a noble example of devotion to comparative history that I am proud to follow. And I am certain that historians who employ the comparative method for generations to come, especially around the question of the institutional and intellectual incorporation of white supremacy, will find themselves heavily indebted to his groundbreaking scholarship.