

FACING RACIAL ISSUES IN A LIBERAL RELIGION

[+ Add to list](#)

By [David Maraniss](#)

March 5, 1990

PHILADELPHIA -- Bob Throne could not shake the question. He wanted to ask, but was embarrassed. How would he phrase it? His ministry at the Church of the Restoration had begun only a month earlier. Now, on this morning in October 1987, he was driving to a church conference in Pittsburgh with Pat DeBrady, a member of his congregation. These few hours along the Pennsylvania Turnpike marked their first chance to get beyond superficial conversation.

They drove past Harrisburg and Bedford, through the tunnels, out into the open, two Americans of the same age, 46: Throne a refugee from the corporate world who switched to the ministry at mid-career; DeBrady a schoolteacher who had lived in the same house near the church for decades. As different as they appeared, they discovered that they shared certain traits, a blend of independence and fragility. But there remained that question.

"Pat," Throne finally asked, hesitantly. "What is a strong and prideful black woman like you doing in this church?"

The words dropped like a heavy load, weighted down with fact and assumption, evoking the peculiar history of a black and white relationship that was totally voluntary and yet deeply painful.

Their Unitarian Universalist denomination featured abolitionist traditions dating back to William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Parker, who packed a gun while writing sermons to protect runaway slaves he hid. Its modern-day commitment to racial justice was symbolized by seminarian James Reeb of Boston, who was beaten to death while taking part in the voting rights demonstrations in Selma, Ala., a quarter-century ago.

But the church was 98 percent white at a national level. It was about as monoracial as any denomination in America on Sunday mornings at 11, called the most segregated hour of the week. Most of the small number of black Unitarians attended a handful of urban churches such as All Souls in Washington, First Unitarian in Chicago, Community Church of New York and Restoration here in Mount Airy, a rare biracial pocket of Philadelphia. Black Unitarian minister Mark Morrison-Reed of Toronto, the leading scholar on racial attitudes in the church, attributes the homogeneity elsewhere to intellectual arrogance, narrow class appeal and a reluctance to proselytize.

The notion of religious integration was further complicated by the all-encompassing role of church in the black community, a function black religious scholar C. Eric Lincoln once described as "government, social club, secret order, espionage system, political party and impetus to freedom and revolution." Black churches were illegal in the South before the Civil War, and in the North black parishioners in white churches were not always welcomed. It was a racist contradiction that still shapes and warps race relations in church and other institutions in this country. Social psychologist Gordon Allport, in his seminal work, "The Nature of Prejudice," described the contradiction this way: We don't want you to be like us, but you must not be different.

As DeBrady started to answer, explaining that she was drawn to the church's humanism and emphasis on freedom of religious thought, Throne realized that his question, as he had feared, was just another expression of arrogance. It assumed that a black person might not have the same inner needs, doubts, intellectual debates, as a white Unitarian Universalist. He felt foolish, and vowed to himself that he would never ask the question again.

But there was more to Throne's question, and to DeBrady's answer, than what each of them said. It resonated with a deeper social and political context -- the relationship between blacks and white liberals in this country: sometimes rewarding, sometimes painful, often naive, more than once on the verge of disintegration from mixed signals, fear and misunderstanding.

Drawing From Diversity

The Church of the Restoration is an old Georgian dark-stone building, sitting at the corner of Gorgas Lane and Stenton Avenue on the edge of east Mount Airy, where the congregation moved in the 1920s after a century in center city Philadelphia. The neighborhood is diverse, much like the church, with wealthy white families perched in mansions only a few blocks from streets troubled by unemployment and drugs. The church draws members rich and poor, but most of the 100-member congregation comes from neighborhood streets mixed with black and white professionals -- teachers, professors, consultants, computer scientists -- who are middle class and liberal.

Restoration was born liberal in 1820, founded by a radical abolitionist and religious free-thinker named Abner Kneeland who later made his mark in Boston as the last person there to face criminal charges of blasphemy. But it remained virtually lily-white for generations, until 1964, the year Rudolph Gelsey, an Austrian-born hell-raising social activist, was installed as minister. That was also the year Pat DeBrady arrived with an infant son.

DeBrady came from the blue-collar city of Erie in northwest Pennsylvania. Her father was the municipality's third black policeman. She was one of the few black students in grade school and high school, a racial situation that made little difference to her until 10th grade, when the dating game started and she felt excluded. Partly because of that, she chose an all-black college, Cheyney University of Pennsylvania. It was

there, she said, that she developed a sense of self-worth, enough to allow her to move outside of her parents' Baptist religion.

"I don't want to be part of the junior choir anymore," DeBrady said to herself. She had always been bothered by having to use the symbols of white religion. When she worshiped at Shiloh Baptist in Erie, why did she have to look up at a painting of a white Jesus? Her concept of God had nothing to do with whiteness, maleness. That is what she was looking for -- or looking to avoid -- when she walked through the doors of Restoration.

She also was attracted to the gospel of Rudy Gelsey. In March 1965, he flew to Selma for the historic voting rights marches, and returned with stories that inspired church members to join him in social action. They formed a Philadelphia to Philadelphia exchange to start a dialogue among blacks and whites in the small namesake Mississippi town where three civil rights workers had been killed. They worked with a watchdog agency tracking local police brutality allegations.

After returning from summer vacation in 1966, Gelsey noticed that his own back yard was changing. Blocks that months earlier had been about 30 percent black were now virtually all black. Gelsey feared real estate agents were steering only black buyers to the area in an effort to encourage white homeowners to sell quickly and cheaply, a practice known as blockbusting. Other members of Restoration shared his suspicion. Bill and Vivian Dikeman received a typical anonymous call: Are you aware that a black person is moving onto your street? In response, they formed the biracial East Mount Airy Neighbors Association to fight the blockbusting in court.

The effort stabilized the neighborhood, which remains multiracial today, and it also gave Gelsey's church a stamp of approval in the black community. "He made the church a place where we could feel some level of comfort," said DeBrady. Black membership increased from a family or two to several dozen. Some white members departed -- a few uncomfortable in an interracial setting, others turned off by Gelsey's abrasive style -- but most stayed. Where many other churches folded or fled to the white suburbs, Restoration persevered.

The days of conflict were only beginning. No sooner had the church set on an interracial path than the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), the denomination's governing body, faced a challenge whose effects still linger. The concepts of the black power movement -- racial pride, black nationalism, self-determination -- were sweeping the country, and alliances between blacks and white liberals forged during the early days of the civil rights struggle were about to be stretched, tested, torn apart. Unitarian Universalists, including Gelsey and DeBrady among others at Restoration, were in the middle of the action.

Black empowerment in the UUA surfaced in October 1967, at a national meeting in New York of the Commission on Religion and Race, called to discuss the church's role in the freedom struggle. Black participants, infused with the energy of the black power movement, held a caucus before the session and developed the concept of an autonomous Black Affairs Council that would distribute \$250,000 a year in

church money to community projects. The caucus demanded that this proposal receive the unqualified endorsement of the commission with no discussion or amendment.

Nonnegotiable demands for money and autonomy would dominate church debate for the next three years.

For many white Unitarians, whose watchwords were reason and democratic procedure, the black caucus tactics were irritating and outrageous. Perhaps, responded blacks, but so was the birth of any idea of consequence. Henry Hampton, a caucus leader who since has earned prominence as producer of the television series "Eyes on the Prize," described the conflict between "those who felt they were the last defense of traditional liberal principles and those blacks and whites who felt this was a last chance to significantly involve the UUA in the black struggle for freedom."

This was a time for choosing sides. Pat DeBrady sided with the caucus. "If you are going to talk about black empowerment," she said, "it is chauvinistic to talk about how that empowerment takes place without investing trust in those being empowered." She felt exhilarated, in charge of her own destiny for the first time, free from liberal paternalism. She agreed with caucus chairman Hayward Henry of Boston, who said true integration meant being able to participate in society without merging with the majority group. "As long as a black man is forced into a white institutional situation in which his total psyche must be absorbed into the white psyche," Henry said, "he becomes destroyed."

The blacks at Restoration had a strong supporter in Gelsey, who was among a group of ministers who theologically related the black caucus position to the "view from the cross," a metaphorical application of the crucifixion of Jesus: Only the oppressed can define the means of overcoming oppression. In a nationwide gathering at his church, Gelsey helped form FULLBAC, a white support group pushing for full funding of the caucus. "It was important for blacks to have their own power," he said, "and not just be doing things that whites thought would be good for them."

Most UUA blacks supported the caucus, but not all. A center of opposition was the Community Church in New York, which had been integrated for decades. Many blacks there rejected what they saw as separatist methods. Jeanette Hopkins, an associate of social psychologist Kenneth B. Clark, resigned from the race and religion commission after it accepted the black caucus demands, saying: "I have no wish to participate in a ritual dance of black demand and white obsequiousness."

Demands from the black caucus intensified as Unitarian finances weakened. The gulf between blacks and UUA leadership grew wider. There were walkouts, charges, finally lawsuits. The Black Affairs Council declined after a promising start. Dana Greeley, the denomination's president during that era, later said he thought the Unitarians were chosen as an early target of black empowerment because they were perceived as an easy place to start. He said he and other liberal white leaders could accept "95 percent of the concept, but not the last gulp" -- the nonnegotiable demands and suspension of rules of procedure. Many blacks left the church and never returned.

DeBrady left for a short time, torn apart by "having to take sides in a terrible kind of way," but came back. Gelsey embraced the black power idea that sympathetic whites should attack white racism in the suburbs. He left Restoration for Westchester County, where he championed a multiracial housing project. The manner in which whites there regarded him was captured in a local headline after he testified at a hearing: Mob Assails Unitarian Minister.

Little Victories and Defeats

Restoration stumbled along as an interracial church, but it was a different place: subdued, withdrawn. During the 1970s and most of the 1980s, the debate over methods for achieving social justice receded, replaced by modest efforts: little victories and defeats. Twelve years ago a black member of the congregation, Alice Murphy, formed a Saturday night singles club at the church. Her dream was to make it integrated. The first year it was mostly white. The second year it was mostly black. Now it is all black. The same happened with a seniors club.

When Bob Throne arrived in 1987, he encountered a congregation that preferred to ignore issues of race. There was still some shell shock from the old days, and there were new concerns: Crack dealers were selling drugs on the churchyard steps. There had been two thefts in the day-care center. It was a delicate situation for Throne. Maintaining the interracial balance at the church, which had 35 blacks among its 100 members, was important to him. He wanted to move it toward multiculturalism in service and tone, not just in numbers. But he understood the complex nature of race relations: The more intimate the setting -- the more like family -- the more difficult it can be.

Throne and his wife, Terry, were the adoptive white parents of a black son and mixed-race daughter. The son was adopted at age 5 after years of abuse: He had been tied to cribs, burned with cigarettes, abandoned. When Throne worked at an insurance agency in Hartford, he would listen to his colleagues tell racist jokes, plead not to be given black secretaries. It pained him to juxtapose that insensitivity with the condition of his own troubled family. As hard as he and Terry tried, they could not bond with their son, and at 15 the young man ran away, leaving a wound in the family psyche that still has not healed five years later.

In response, Throne did not withdraw from difficult issues of race; rather he committed himself to confronting them. His first ministry was in Maine, where his Jewish wife was snubbed and his mixed-race daughter was subjected to racial slurs. He sought out Restoration as a haven and a place where he might strive for his sense of the ideal.

At Restoration, Throne discovered, whites and blacks sang from the same hymnal, shared joys and sorrows, washed church dishes, struggled to shape inner meaning from the external chaos of life. In such ways they were intimate. But at another level, when it came to their true feelings about race and understanding of multiculturalism, they interacted as strangers, disconnected, using separate vocabularies and points of reference. That was evident at a meeting last October, when 14 church members, black and white, gathered to discuss what it meant to them that Restoration was interracial.

Carl Heinlen, a white computer salesman, opened by saying he would not attend this church unless it was integrated. "I searched for a church like this," he said. "I get nurtured here, and I don't think I would without the black involvement. I get changed here, and I assume the other Archie Bunkers do, too."

Pat DeBrady said she knew where she stood, religiously, and it was not on the banks of the river Jordan. But there were times when she would prefer attending an African-American UUA church, if only one existed in Philadelphia. "Sometimes," she said, "I need to know how the eagle stirs its nest."

What? Doris Holtzman, a white longtime church activist whose husband was a professor of moral philosophy at Temple University, needed help with the imagery.

DeBrady translated: The emotive can be as important as the intellectual.

Bill Dikeman, a white public relations consultant, said he did not like categorizations by color. He thought the church was colorblind. "People don't come here as representatives of a race or cultural point of view," he said. "If they did, we'd get bogged down in 'Things are black, things are white, and never the twain shall meet.' "

Marilyn Dyson, a black woman who recently returned to graduate school after 10 years as an oil company professional, said whites are always reluctant to attribute anything to race. "You avoid it by claiming to be colorblind," she said. "But being colorblind often means being blind to the black experience."

"What is the black experience?" asked Vivian Dikeman, a former schoolteacher. "What is the white experience?" She could not define the white experience.

"That IS the definition of the white experience: not having to know what it is," said Arlene Lloyd, a human relations specialist who worked as social psychologist Kenneth Clark's assistant in New York before moving to Philadelphia a few years ago. "Blacks cannot wake up in the morning without knowing what the black experience is. The pain and stress of achieving integration in this country is not easy. The burden is on blacks to accommodate white society. The ones accepted are the ones most like white people. To a certain extent, as poet Paul Dunbar said, we wear masks as blacks in this culture, and it's very rare to take off that mask completely."

Jazz and Blues Amid White Hymns

In the weeks after the discussion, the congregation returned to issues of race. Arlene Lloyd presented the congregation with a survey showing that black members did not feel the church was as inclusive as white members assumed. She told the Sunday service committee that it should strive to be more intentionally multicultural. Throne felt more comfortable including Alice Walker and Paul Dunbar in his readings. The church pianist played more spirituals. Jazz and blues were added to the mix of white New England hymns.

On the last day of 1989, for a few hours, there was a glimpse of how it might feel if the church were truly integrated. The congregation had gathered to celebrate Kwanzaa, the modern-day black Christmas. Pat

DeBrady led the service, her altar draped with a collage of African fabrics in the shape of Africa. Alfie Pollitt played experimental jazz on the keyboard and bells. Arlene Lloyd placed candles in a holder called the Kinara.

As DeBrady looked out on the celebrants, she felt an overwhelming sense of affirmation. Kwanzaa, she said, is a uniquely African-American expression of community, but its values can be shared by all. To symbolize that, she called up the youngest and oldest people there. The youngest was the Thrones' daughter, Cambria, a radiant 14-year-old. The oldest was Dorothy Briggs, a white woman who came to Kwanzaa from the church retirement home. Cambria was reluctant at first, but she finally joined the two women at the pulpit. With DeBrady in the middle, they joined hands. Brown. Black. And white.

NEXT: The military

 **0 Comments**

David Maraniss

David Maraniss is an associate editor at The Washington Post, where he has worked since 1977. A Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter and author, he has served as Maryland reporter, Maryland editor, deputy Metro editor, Metro editor, project editor, congressional reporter and presidential campaign biographer. [Follow](#) 
