

## Racism at Home and Abroad: Thoughts from a Christian Ethicist

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**Abstract.** In this article Christian ethicist Michael S. Jones introduces the work of Princeton University ethicist Thomas Pogge on the areas of global poverty and global justice. He then applies Pogge's ideas to an ethical issue of continuing importance: racism. He discusses the history of racism in the United States and Romania, pointing out numerous parallels both historical and contemporary. He discusses the appropriate attitude for Christians to adopt on the issue, arguing that while Christian sources are not univocal on the subject, there is an egalitarianism at the heart of Christianity that rules out racism as a Christian attitude. He concludes that Christians can contribute significantly to overcoming racism in the U.S. and Romania by addressing the underlying attitudinal problem from the podium and the pulpit, with the pen, and through their daily interactions with each other.

**Key words:** Thomas Pogge, Christian ethics, global justice, racism, egalitarianism.

The Princeton philosopher Thomas Pogge is well known for his work on global justice and related issues. His sensitivity to the needs of others and his effectiveness at communicating his empathy in a way that impacts global thinking on these issues is a model for academics everywhere, and particularly for American academia, which often works from the comfort of an air-conditioned office, viewing the results of global disparity without being sufficiently moved by it to act. In this article I interact with Pogge's work on global justice and attempt to support it by arguing that one contributing factor to global injustice is the persistent problem of racism, that Christians sources strongly support an egalitarian view of the races, and that Christians can and should be engaged in combating racism.

Pogge's writing on global justice is both intellectually compelling and emotionally stirring. It ranges from his early work *Realizing Rawls* (1989) (wherein he extends the Rawlsian understanding of justice to encompass issues of global disparity) through influential titles including *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (2008a) and *The Health Impact Fund: Making New Medicines Accessible for All* (2008b), to last year's *The Individual Deprivation Measure: A Gender-Sensitive Approach to Poverty Measurement* (2014). I hope that these and his other excellent publications will influence American academia toward a more global humanitarianism and that through influencing the attitudes and interests of academia his work will influence the direction of American society and culture, which can be disappointingly materialistic and narcissistic.

Pogge's work to combat global poverty is not limited to teaching and speaking: he has engaged the problem practically as well, and this, too, is an example for the rest of us. He has served as the president of *Academics Stand Against Poverty* (ASAP) and *Incentives for Global Health* (IGH) and has been active in a range of other organizations

combating global poverty. He is also engaged with universities and scholarly journals in the developing world, lending his expertise and prestige to their programs.

In *World Poverty and Human Rights* (2008a, 7) Pogge identifies four “easy reasons” to ignore global poverty: futility, jeopardy, perversity, and optimism that things are improving on their own. The first of these, futility, refers to the fact that the task of global relief seems overwhelming, which often causes those who are not impoverished to feel justified in not even attempting to work toward global relief. The second, jeopardy, describes the perhaps subconscious fear in the hearts of the more affluent that the poverty void is so large that it could consume all that they have to give without making a significant difference, with the undesirable result that both the impoverished and their would-be benefactors are rendered penniless. The third reason identified by Pogge is “perversity,” by which he means the assumption that preventing poverty-related deaths would actually contribute to increased competition for the limited food and other necessities in impoverished communities and hence would actually aggravate poverty within those communities.

These three reasons for not responding to global poverty are “pessimistic” in nature: they view the problem, in one way or another, as being insurmountable. The fourth reason is actually optimistic by nature. There appear to be a great many affluent people who believe that, through one mechanism or another, the problem of global poverty is gradually but steadily resolving itself and really does not demand our intervention. Possible mechanisms that could be affecting this presumed progress include the passing of colonialism, the spread of free market economics, and scientific and technological progress.

While it would be comforting to believe that the problem of global poverty is resolving itself, Pogge shows that it is not. He also repudiates the other “easy reasons” for ignoring global poverty, leaving the reader with little justification for inaction. Nonetheless relative inaction is exactly the response of most people vis-à-vis this desperate situation. The obvious question to ask is “why”? Why aren’t more people moved to pity, sympathy, compassion, and/or action in the face of the probability that nine million people will die poverty-related deaths this year alone (2008a, 11)?

There is no single answer to this question. Contributing factors range from simple ignorance to much more malicious factors including greed, the love of power, and racism. I’d like to focus on the last of these. Racism remains a significant problem in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I believe that it contributes to our apathy toward global poverty.

## I. RACISM

That racism continues to be a very big problem in the US, 150 years after the emancipation proclamation, the desegregation of the US military beginning in 1948, *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, all of which were steps taken to overcome racism in America, is indisputable

in light of recent events. Evidence of this includes last year's demonstrations and deadly riots in Ferguson, Missouri, and this year's deadly riots in Baltimore, Maryland.

Racism is a learned thought pattern that often, though perhaps not always, results in discriminatory acts. It has many causes. In North America, the early colonists were white Europeans. Their eventual economic, military, and (from their perspective) cultural superiority to the native population led them to believe that Native Americans were inherently inferior. Succeeding waves of immigrants (forced and free) were also of lower socio-economic status, which reinforced the perception of European superiority. Economic and socio-political disadvantages perpetuated the denigration of the racially – stratified lower classes. Today, in the face of ever increasing ethnic diversity and in spite of the two election wins by President Obama, Caucasian peoples continue to dominate political and economic life.

It must be granted, however, that North American racism is not confined to white people. Many African-Americans take great pride in the achievements that their 'race' has made in spite of white oppression. Some despise whites because of the inhumane treatment that African-Americans have received at the hands of whites. Others have an attitude of superiority because of the successes of African-American athletes. Some Asian-Americans spurn African-Americans for their presumed un-industriousness and whites for their indulgence. Hence I repeat that "racism continues to be a very big problem in the US."

An outsider might suppose that racism is not such a big problem in Romania. After all, Romania has almost no population of African or Native America descent. Asians and Hispanics are also relatively few. But Romania has its own racial tensions. I lived in Cluj-Napoca from 2000 to 2002, and during my time in that wonderful Transylvanian city I encountered Romanian attitudes toward Hungarians and Hungarian attitudes toward Romanians that were undeniably the product of negative ethnic stereotypes. Hungarian neighbors would not teach their children to speak Romanian and longed to move to a neighboring Hungarian village, Hungarian management complained about the work ethic of Romanian employees, and in general the Hungarian population reminisced about the days when Transylvania was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Meanwhile the Romanian mayor was pushing to make Romanian the official language and was painting everything in sight the colors of the Romanian flag. Romanian friends complained that Hungarians weren't loyal Romanians and one complete stranger tried to convince me that Hungarians are genetically predisposed toward violence.

In Romania the most startling racism is not directed against Hungarians but rather the Roma. In this context the parallels between Romania and the United States are truly amazing. In Muntenia and Moldova the Roma were enslaved beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. As in America, these slaves were largely employed as manual agricultural laborers. As in America, they were subject to punishments that were severe and inhuman, ranging from simple beatings to having their lips cut off. Interestingly, though perhaps not coincidentally, between 1842 and 1863 legislation was passed that freed the Roma living in these territories (Greenburg 2010, 923-5). (Note that 1863 was also the year in which the

President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, issued the Emancipation Proclamation.) This year, 2015, marks ten years of the “Decade of Roma Inclusion,” which has been described as “an unprecedented political commitment by European governments to eliminate discrimination against Roma” and in which Romania is an official participant.<sup>1</sup>

Just as the Emancipation Proclamation and subsequent legislation and legal decisions have not ended racism in America, freedom from slavery and various laudatory governmental initiatives have not eliminated racist attitudes towards Romania’s sizable Roma minority. Economically speaking, Affirmative Action has resulted in some African-Americans and some Roma ascending toward the very top of their professions, but it has also tended to provoke resentment on the part of some within the majority race who do not fully understand the reasons behind such measures and who feel that they are the targets of reverse discrimination.

There is another US-Romania parallel that must be mentioned. In the US, although most African-Americans report that racial discrimination continues to be widespread and even systemic, most Caucasians report that they are not aware of such discrimination and seem to believe that racism is largely a problem of the past. Interestingly the exact same situation appears to obtain in Romania. Educated, urban Romanians have little interaction with Roma and seem to assume, or even be convinced, that racial prejudice is not a significant factor in Romania. They assume that the Roma who want to be integrated into society have been, that they have equal educational and employment opportunities, that they enjoy fair legal representation, etc. In contrast, Roma report frequent and sometimes systemic discrimination. Studies show that Roma form the lowest economic strata of Romanian society, that they have the lowest literacy rates, that they are politically under-represented, they have the least access to medicine, and they experience open hostility and discrimination in stores, at the Post Office, when attempting to hire a taxi, and in many, many other areas of life. Strangely enough, this, too, seems to reflect the African-American experience. The parallels are indeed striking.

One point that I am trying to make is that racism can be an attitude that one has but is not aware of. A 2013 article in the *New York Times* made this point. It was titled “The Good, Racist People,” and told the story of a very successful African American actor who was frisked by a white store employee who had jumped to the unjustified conclusion that he was trying to shoplift something (Coates 2013). This employee was a good worker who was simply looking out for the welfare of his employer. However, he had a subconsciously racial preconception that caused him to hastily draw a mistaken conclusion. Had he been aware of his racial prejudice perhaps he would not have made the mistake that he did, but unfortunately we are often blind to our own prejudices. Most white Americans are not aware that they harbor a prejudicial attitude, and in my limited experience I am inclined

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1] From the website of the Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation, Teréz krt. 46, H-1066 Budapest, Hungary: <http://www.romadecade.org/about-the-decade-decade-in-brief> (accessed 20 January, 2016).

to believe that very many Romanians harbor prejudice toward the Roma and are similarly oblivious to the fact. Conversation with personal friends has informally confirmed this.

Here I want to make a confession: I too am a racist. I haven't always been aware of it, though. Let me relate to you how I discovered this about myself. I was born in the 1960s, and one of my early memories involves seeing newscasts from the war in Vietnam. I saw pictures of Vietnamese soldiers and refugees who were sad, dirty, poor, and seemingly homeless. It was my first exposure to Asian faces. In the '70s I saw broadcasts about the revolution in Iran and in the '80s it was famine in Ethiopia. There were, of course, other conflicts as I was growing up, too – in Africa, the Middle East, and Central America. I felt bad for them, but it all seemed quite distant and I imagined that there was nothing I could do about it. Then in 1991 war broke out in Yugoslavia. I had heard about the war for several weeks before I actually saw a television news broadcast about it. When I did, I was shocked. Pictured were long lines of refugees trudging on foot, fleeing approaching armies with their worldly possessions in their arms, on their backs, or in wheel barrows, their children straggling along behind. I had seen such images before – in Vietnam, the Middle East, and other places. What was different here was that these refugees looked like – ME! They were white, they were wearing western clothes, and they looked like they could have come from America. I instantly felt strong empathy for them, I couldn't believe what was happening to them, and I wanted my country to step up to the plate and help them. And I quickly realized that my reaction to their plight was stronger and more guttural than my reaction to the similar plights of people who I had seen fleeing in other parts of the world. I empathized so strongly with these people because they looked like me – at least in part because they were my race.

This is where I get back to the issues of global poverty and global justice. I suspect that one factor that significantly contributes to the lack of empathy that many affluent Westerners feel toward the plight of the poor is related to the kind of racism that I discovered in myself in 1991. We don't empathize with them because we do not see ourselves in them.

## II. A CHRISTIAN ETHIC OF RACE

As a Christian philosopher, I would like to explore this problem of racism from a Christian perspective. Ontologically speaking, a Christian ethic finds grounding for morality in the very nature of God, a being who is classically conceived as being omnipotent, omniscient, omniscient, and perhaps most important to ethics, omnibenevolent. Many ethicists take Plato's Euthyphro Dilemma as eloquently expressing the horns of a dilemma that is inescapable for any such theistic ethic: on one horn, if God determines what is moral, then it is arbitrary; on the other horn, if God chooses what is moral based upon an omniscient awareness of a morality that exists independently of him, then we have not explained what makes it moral. Contemporary Christian ethicists such as the late Philip Quinn, later developments in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Robert Adams, and emerging scholars like David Baggett speak of a divine

command theory that avoids the problem of arbitrariness via tethering goodness to the nature of God rather than to God's will alone. While this effectively evades both horns of the Euthyphro dilemma, it potentially leads to a problem by tethering morality to an unknowable transcendent being. Discovering morality when it is tied to the transcendent is then resolved through the affirmation of divine revelation, both general and special, and the Thomistic concept of Natural Law. By far the most significant revelation of God's nature is, for the Christian, the incarnation of God as Jesus Christ. Hence the Christian ethicist has a range of resources to appeal to when studying the Christian attitude toward race: there is human nature and the natural world, there is God's revelation via prophets and the scriptures, and there is Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, while Christian resources can be used to oppose racism, they can also be used to support it. Many attempts have been made to support forms of racism from the Bible. Some have argued that God's purpose in confusing the languages at the tower of Babel was to insure the separation of the races, thus making racial segregation an act of God not to be opposed.<sup>2</sup> Others have used the curses of Cain (Genesis 4) and Ham (via his son Canaan, Genesis 9) in isogetical attempts to prove the inferiority of African peoples. Some point to a version of racism of divine origin that seems clear in the Hebrew Bible: the Jews were a chosen 'race', and while the Bible is emphatic that they were not chosen based on their own merit but because of God's designs for them and through them the entire world,<sup>3</sup> there are a number of problematic narratives in the Hebrew Bible that relate racial/religious/political tensions between the Jews and the other races of the Levant. The Bible even records God commanding Israel to exterminate some neighboring peoples.<sup>4</sup>

Some have taken such passages and used them to support racism. Notably, many slave owners in the American south were professing Christians and notoriously used the purported "mark of Cain" and "curse of Ham" to justify the enslavement of Africans. Interestingly, during the time when Roma slaves were legal in Romania, the Orthodox Church operated large plantations where slave labor was employed (Achim 2004, 97). I am not familiar with Orthodox attempts at justifying this practice, though I can imagine that they appealed to passages in both testaments of the Bible that mention slavery without condemning it, that require slave-owners to treat their slaves humanly but make no mention of setting them free, and that urge slaves to obey their masters.<sup>5</sup> As many scholars have shown, the Bible contains principles concerning the value of human life, human

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2] There is nothing in the context of the biblical story of the tower of Babel that supports this theory.

3] This message is seen in both Testaments, for example in Deuteronomy 7:7 and 8, Isaiah 42:6, and Romans 9:11ff.

4] See the sixth chapter of the book of Joshua.

5] See for instance Eph. 6:5, "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ," Col. 3:22, "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God," or Pt. 2:18, "Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward."

dignity, and an individual's direct accountability to God that contributed significantly to the eventual overthrow of slavery.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless the Bible does not in fact condemn slavery in the straightforward fashion that we moderns would like.

Happily, the biblical position vis-à-vis racism is clearer. To begin with, the biogenetic potential for race variation seems most likely to have been built into the human race by its Creator. Therefore it seems that racial variation is part of the original plan of God. While the specialization caused by microevolution could result in some races developing abilities that surpass those of other races in specific areas, no one race can objectively be shown to be superior or inferior to another when all areas are compared. Most racism seems to stem from cultural differences, which are malleable and are judged subjectively.

Even if one race could be proved to excel others in every area of objective comparison, on a Christian anthropology this would not warrant racist attitudes. Christianity holds that all humans are created in the 'imago dei' and are therefore worthy of respect.<sup>7</sup> In comparison to this, all mental and physical abilities are insignificant. Furthermore, all are equally affected by the fall into sin, and God's redemptive love is extended to each human individually. While extreme Calvinist interpretations of divine love posit a differentiation between those who God loves generally and those who he loves specially (in a specifically soteriological sense), the mainstream of Christian theology sees God's love as extended equally to all people: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." And the five-point Calvinist who affirms that God does not love the reprobate in the same way that he loves the elect bases this not on any attribute of the elect or the reprobate but rather on the sovereign and unconditioned will of God. Hence there is no room for racism "at the foot of the cross."

The Christian ethicist acknowledges that there are racially-loaded narratives in the Hebrew Bible to which she or he must respond. Most notorious of these are the so-called "Canaanite Genocide" narratives in which Yahweh commands the Israelites to massacre the inhabitants of the Canaanite cities prior to settling the land.<sup>8</sup> In some instances the

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6] For an interesting discussion of various uses of the Bible to support and oppose slavery, see Willard M. Swartley's still influential book, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983), ch. 1, "The Bible and Slavery." See also the second and third chapters of Kenneth G. Cleaver. 2002. An Examination of Albert Barnes' Handling of the Bible in the Debate on Slavery in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America. *Faculty Dissertations* paper 25, [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/fac\\_dis/25](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/fac_dis/25) (accessed 27 February, 2016).

7] Gen. 1:27, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them," Gen. 9:6, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man."

8] Numbers 31, Deuteronomy 2:30-7, Joshua 6. Whether or not these passages record genocide, and if they do, how a Christian should respond, is a debated issue. See Copan, Paul. 2008. Is Yahweh a Moral Monster? The New Atheists and Old Testament Ethics. *Philosophia Christi* 10: 7-37; Morrison, Wesley. 2009. Did God Command Genocide? A Challenge to the Biblical Inerrantist. *Philosophia Christi* 11: 7-26; and Rauser, Randal. 2009. 'Let Nothing that Breathes Remain Alive': On the Problem of Divinely Commanded Genocide. *Philosophia Christi* 11: 27-41.

cleansing of the land extends even to the killing of women, children, and animals. In *Is God a Moral Monster: Making sense of the Old Testament* Paul Copan discusses these difficult passages at length (2011). Relevant to our discussion here, it must be noted that, regardless of whether such passages actually record historical incidents of genocide, at issue was not the race of the Canaanites but rather their moral and religious practices, which involved atrocities such as ritual prostitution and child sacrifice. Hence while such passages are unpleasant, to say the least, they are not racist.

Less ethically shocking but more broadly present in the Hebrew Bible is the distinction between the Israelites as a people and the surrounding nations. This is the very reason that circumcision was instituted – as a sign setting Abraham and his descendants apart from everyone else. It carries with it far-reaching implications, including prohibition from marrying non-Israelites, preferential treatment when doing business with other Israelites in comparison to how one conducts business with non-Israelites, and more. Some aspects of this parallel closely the attitudes and practices of white southerners toward African-Americans: there are those who believe that interracial marriage is sin and who, even today, prefer a policy of “separate but equal.”

However, as in the Canaanite Genocide narratives already discussed, the primary issue here involves moral and religious purity rather than racial prejudice. Once again what the biblical narratives are relating is Yahweh’s desire to produce a morally and spiritually mature nation that will be appropriately prepared to bring forth the coming messiah who will be the savior of mankind. Hence racism is not the issue here.

Furthermore, there are notable examples of inter-racial acceptance in the Hebrew Bible. One need only think of Moses, that man of God who led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness to the Promised Land. His wife and his father-in-law, with whom he appears to have had a warm relationship, were Kenites rather than Israelites. During the time of the Judges a Moabite woman named Ruth was accepted into Israel because of her outstanding character and her adoption of the Israelite religion. She is recorded as an ancestor of King David and, through him, Jesus. Jesus himself seemed to take pleasure in reminding the Jews that the prophet Elijah took refuge in a time of need with a Sidonian widow and that Elisha healed Naaman, a leader of the Syrian army, of leprosy, even though he did not heal many Israelites who suffered the same disease.<sup>9</sup> I believe that a thorough reading of the biblical texts would support the conclusion that a racist reading of the Hebrew Bible is not warranted.

When we turn our attention to the New Testament things become crystal clear. The New Testament authors saw Israel as God’s chosen vessel for bringing redemption to all peoples. Israel is special, but instrumentally so rather than inherently so. There is a

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9] Luke 4:25-27, “But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman the Syrian.”



principle of racial egalitarianism running through the New Testament from the Gospels to the end of the Apocalypse.

This egalitarianism is seen first in the person of Jesus, who was raised a Jew and would have been expected to exhibit the same sort of prejudice toward non-Jews that was common among Palestinian Jews of his day. But Jesus had considerable ministry among the non-Jews in Palestine, interacting with them with compassion and understanding. He summarized the teachings of the law in the two statements “Love God with all your heart” and “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Then through parables he went on to explain how this command transcends racial, ethnic, and geo-political boundaries.<sup>10</sup> In his last words he commissioned his disciples to “go therefore into all nations, preaching the gospel.” The word “nations” here is the Greek *ethnos*, which refers to people groups rather than political entities. Christians are to take the message of God’s love to every people group – which of course includes every race.

We find the same attitude gradually being adopted by Jesus’ disciples. The most pronounced declaration of this is found in the writings of the Apostle Paul. In Gal. 3: 26-28 he explains that Christians “[...] are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul is saying that within the church race and social status are irrelevant: we are all on equal footing in Christ and are actually related to one another through Him.

In the last book of the New Testament, variously referred to as the *Apocalypse* and the *Book of Revelation*, all of the kingdoms of the world are pictured as equal before the throne of God. This passage in chapter 21 is nearly poetic:

1: And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

2: And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

3: And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

4: And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

22: And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it.

23: And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof.

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[10] See especially the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

24: And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.

25: And the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night there.

26: And they shall bring the glory and honour of the nations into it.

### III. CONCLUSION

Returning again to the problems of global justice and poverty, if one factor that significantly contributes to the lack of empathy that many affluent Westerners feel toward the plight of the poor is the kind of subconscious racism that I have described, a racism that prevents us from seeing ourselves in the other and thus limits our empathy when faced with their needs, then addressing such racism is one step that we can take toward establishing the empathy that is needed if we are going to see more people respond to these pressing issues. The approach that I have taken to racism is overtly Christian and as such has an appeal that is limited to the Christian audience. However, since professing Christians form a sizable portion of the populations of our two countries, working on appropriately shaping the attitudes that Christians have towards other races should be helpful. Hence my proposal is that by addressing the problem of racism in our classes, our pulpits, our publications, and our daily interactions with our brothers and sisters in Christ we can make a significant contribution to the work that Pogge has been doing.

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