

*Race and Liberty in America: The Essential Reader*. Edited by Jonathan Bean. University of Kentucky Press and The Independent Institute, 2009. X + 239 pp. pb. \$24.95. ISBN 978-0-8131-9231-4.

### Henry Kuo

A general stereotype of political parties in the United States is that the Democratic Party – generalized as politically liberal – has the upper hand when it comes to the issue of race in America. Indeed, on the night of the Presidential Election (November 6, 2012), the audiences of the Obama and Romney campaign headquarters seemed to confirm that stereotype; the Romney campaign was a sea of Caucasian, largely 30+ year-old, supporters, whereas the Obama campaign was full of upbeat people of varying ages and ethnicities. Of course, there are American minorities who are card-carrying Republicans and voted for Romney. That fact, however, was not reflected at the Romney campaign headquarters. The media picked up on this, and to nobody’s surprise, analyses abounded of how the GOP (Grand Old Party, also known as Republican Party) still needs to reach out to minority voters.

*Race and Liberty in America* provides a counter-argument, namely, that neoliberals (or, in America, neoconservatives) have played important roles historically in the fight for racial equality.<sup>1</sup> It is a collection of primary source readings regarding race and ethnicity from individuals whom Bean identifies as classical liberals. The anthology include contributions from Supreme Court justices (e.g. John Paul Stephens, Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, among others), presidents (e.g. Ronald Reagan, Calvin Coolidge), authors such as Zora Neale Hurston, civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., economists such as Milton Friedman, and other important historical figures. Progressive Christian readers may be surprised that Republicans and political conservative members were among the champions of civil rights movement historically. Indeed, the Republicans dominated the North in its early days, fervently holding to the anti-slavery platform. The anthology contains also Bean’s concluding essay and introduction to classic liberal thought, all of which explain the *raison d'être* of the book.

1 As a point of clarification, what Bean terms “classical liberalism” is often identified with political conservatism in the United States. Its philosophy is best identified with libertarianism.

Bean's anthology is intended to advance the case for a classical liberal approach to race. Classical liberalism traces its roots to the philosophies of John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and other noted political philosophers. They emphasized that individuals possess the moral capacity to pursue their own interests. John Locke's famous assertion that everyone has the natural right to "life, liberty, and happiness" was, in fact, classical liberalism exemplified. John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham would later construct their philosophy of utilitarianism using classical liberalism as an anchor point; utilitarianism essentially claims that morality pivots around the fulfillment of individual desires. In recent decades, classical liberalism is best articulated by the political economist Friedrich Hayek. Hayek argued that economic growth is best achieved not through state intervention, but through minimal interference from the state. Racial equality, to put it in the context of race, is advanced not through its imposition through some outside influence (governments, special interest groups, etc.) but from individuals acting on their own self-interests.

Bean asserts that no one political position represented in the United States (modern conservatism or progressive liberalism) commands a monopoly on the issue of race and civil rights. Prominent leaders in both the Democratic and Republican Parties, for instance, voiced support for affirmative action in state universities; classical liberals would argue that such programs only worsen racial inequalities. Included in the anthology is an article originally published in the *National Review* by Ward Connerly, who was acerbic in his criticism of both Democrats and Republicans for subverting civil liberties in order to maintain racial-preferential policies such as affirmative action. (Bean, 289-290)

Nonetheless, as Bean himself acknowledged, most of the primary source materials from after the 1850s came largely from Republicans, a selection which might invite two criticisms from readers: (1) by selecting only sources pertaining to race from Republicans, Bean unwittingly omits the voices from Democrats and other social progressives who have undoubtedly addressed race issues, such as Malcolm X or James H. Cone; (2) the Republican Party could hardly be considered (both historically and today) "classical liberal" since they have been proponents of policies that led to greater State intervention in personal affairs, such as Prohibition. Bean responds by noting that the anthology, for one, addresses specifically the subject of "racial

freedom,” not a general subject on “race.” As he describes at the beginning of his introduction, he sought to find a “third way” out of a dialogue that, according to him, is dominated by the political Left and Right. Second, he claims that while classical-liberal Republicans were indeed “statist” in terms of many private issues such as alcohol consumption (Prohibition), they were not quite so on the issue of race.

*Race and Liberty in America* certainly succeeds in providing an alternative approach to the problem of race other than through State intervention. Furthermore, the anthology shows quite successfully that classical liberalism is neither “Left” or “Right” on the political spectrum. The case would, perhaps, be made stronger had he included the voices of classical liberals who do not clearly identify with the Republican (or Democratic) Party, such as individuals from the Libertarian Party or those who ascribe to Libertarianism.

I do want to devote some attention to Bean’s claim that among the influences of classical liberalism is the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. For Bean, the five influences of classical liberalism include individual freedom, the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, the American Constitution, a tradition of color-blindness, and capitalism. The confluence of these five influences create a society where, assuming that the federal government provides minimal intervention, deviations from color-blindness (i.e. racism) is costly because it is swiftly penalized by social norms and market forces. Thus arises an efficient and effective means to put to rest the problem of racial inequality. To put it simply, in a perfectly color-blind society, a racist would be penalized because no member would desire to associate with the racist individual. People would avoid trading with that individual, for instance.

Bean’s description of the influences of classical liberalism is fascinating because some of these influences contradict each other in many ways. As an example, the tradition of color-blindness was, at some point in American history, not part of the American Constitution. The Judeo-Christian religious tradition is not a consistent proponent of individual freedom or capitalism (indeed, the Scriptures are pre-modern texts, predating capitalism). But wording matters here; Bean does not argue that those influences constitute classical liberalism – they are mainly *influences*, drawing certain compatible aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Bean raises only one: the “Golden Rule,” to do to others what one would have others do to herself. (3) Because

they are influences, one cannot expect all aspects of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition to be fully complementary with the ideals of classical liberalism. Indeed, many stalwarts and founders of the classical liberal tradition, such as Jeremy Bentham, Thomas Jefferson, and Adam Smith, for instance, ascribed to Deism.

My main criticism of the anthology, however, is its understanding of “racial freedom,” a term that Bean did not explicate. Let us consider one possible interpretation of “race freedom,” which is tersely put in Antonin Scalia’s Supreme Court response in the 1995 case *Adarand Constructors Inc. vs. Peña* where he asserts that “we are just one race here. It is American.” (Bean, 281) It is, no doubt, a commendable statement, drawing from the classical-liberal influences of color-blindness and the American Constitution. “Race freedom,” here signifies the freedom for all members of society from making judgments on others using skin color, physical attributes, and the cultural stereotypes associated with them. Yet, during the 1998 Winter Olympics, MSNBC issued the headline, “American Beats Out Kwan.” Both Tara Lipinski – the Gold Medalist – and Michelle Kwan are American.<sup>2</sup> However powerful classical liberalism may be in Bean’s estimation, the reality still remains far from ideal. The “American race,” paradoxically, still manages to exclude certain Americans. Or consider, for instance, the discrimination experienced by Arab and Indian Americans in the wake of September 11, 2001. Thus, the reality is far from Scalia’s claim that “we are just one race here.” In such a definition of “race freedom,” Bean’s anthology risks making classical liberal views on race idealistic and not entirely cognizant of the pervasiveness of “racial oppression” in society today.

Or let us consider another definition of “race freedom,” one that is economically-constructed. In other words, all members of society are freed from making skin color, physical attributes, and cultural stereotypes associated with them the basis for excluding some individuals from participation in the market. This is one reason why Bean and prominent classical liberals criticize systems such as affirmative action, which requires universities to include diversity as a part of admissions policies. Such systems, in some cases, constitute “reverse racism” where White applicants are turned down in favor

2 For a more detailed analysis, see Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners Or Honorary Whites? The Asian American Experience Today* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 40.

of minority applicants who may have less stellar qualifications in order to fulfill diversity criteria in the universities' admissions policies. Here, Bean risks being over-optimistic about the color-blindness of market forces. Market forces do not, in other words, necessarily penalize the racist and even if they do, the "penalty" for racism may not be enough to offset the "advantages" of discrimination. Clearly, slavery in the United States was outlawed through State intervention rather than market forces.

How "race freedom" is construed is important because differing constructions merit different responses. If "racial freedom" were to be defined in Scalia's fashion, then any theological discussion on race is moot; race equality has been achieved. But if "race freedom" concerns color-blindness, To be sure, however, Bean's anthology does not seek to make a theological argument; indeed, it is not a theological anthology. Some of the primary source readings invoked biblical imageries and arguments to fight racial discrimination. William Wilberforce invoked the notion of justice as outlined in Micah 6:8 in his condemnation of slavery. (19) Unitarian minister William Emery Channing utilized the image of humankind's creation in the *imago Dei* in arguing that slaves are human. (31) The employment of Christian theology or allusions (or any other religious allusions, for the matter) virtually disappeared in sources after the late 19th century. For instance, most of the recent readings included in the anthology pertain to the Constitutional law in the 20th century.

I would like to think, however, that a Christian did not, historically, have to be classical liberal (or socially progressive) to be a proponent of racial justice. Yet, history proves quite the opposite; Christian pastors provided "biblical" justification for owning slaves during the 19th century. That Christianity had a rather checkered record in modern history with respect to race should compel Christians to courageously and humbly confront where it has failed in affirming people of different races and ethnicities. Discussions on race in America, from a theological point of view, need to take into account the pervasiveness of original sin, a doctrine that is axiomatic in most Judeo-Christian traditions. Indeed, instead of being over-optimistic on human nature or on market forces, the doctrine of original sin provides a more sober and, in my view, more realistic assessment of the situation today.

Theologically, I wonder if “race freedom” is indeed possible in the presence of sin-condition, regardless of how it was defined above, or whether one approaches race from classical liberal or social progressive perspectives. I would venture that the witness of Jesus – his fellowship with the outcasts and the margins of society – could serve as an apt model. But this discussion is outside the confines of this book review.

*Race and Liberty in America* may be a useful addition to a reading list for courses on the intersections of theology and race or politics in order to provide an additional perspective on a unique philosophical tradition. I might read this anthology alongside other works such as Peter Heltzel’s *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics* or Michael Emerson and Christian Smith’s *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race*. The latter two books acknowledge the pervasiveness of racism in our society, and provide different and creative approaches to racial discrimination. Regardless, any discussion on race in America is going to be difficult and complex; this anthology will no doubt add complexity to those discussions.