

# Endsights:

*"What can a white man teach me about the African-American experience?"*



By Eric McAllister  
Staff

The second day of classes, Friday, August 5, 1990, I walked up the steps of Fetzer Gym. Anticipation and eagerness ran through my veins— I was going to learn more about my heritage, the African-American experience. The classroom filled up; where is the instructor who will teach me all of this valuable history. Heads turned and looked as the door opens—an average looking white man walks in and says, "Hello, I'm Robert Porter— your AFAM 41 instructor for the fall semester." What can a white man teach me about the African-American experience?, I thought. This is probably the question many African-American students had as they entered Robert S. Porter's AFAM 40 or 41 classes.

Developing a sense of the African-American experience at an early age, Robert credits his mother for his strong interest in African-American heritage— so much so that at the early age of seven or eight, he was reading books on Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. Growing up part of his life in a predominantly African-American neighborhood in Houston, Texas, also fueled his fire for more knowledge of the African-American experience, but perhaps the most significant incident that made Robert Porter want to know more was when an African-American playmate came up to him crying after an argument with another white playmate. He declared sobbingly that he want to be white. Although quite young at the time Robert knew this was wrong for his friend to say. This incident motivated him to think of the situation of African-Americans in this country and how, by learning more, he could somehow make a difference.

Later, while attending the University of Texas at Austin, he looked forward to taking AFAM history to further his quest for knowledge. Out of 154 hours as an undergraduate, Robert claims the two AFAM classes he took were the best classes he took at the university.

Coming to UNC-CH as a graduate student in history, he made a beneficial friendship with Collin Palmer who brought him into the AFAM Studies department as a TA for Freddie Parker and Sonya Stone. Robert was very thankful for being given the opportunity to come into the AFAM Studies department by Collin Palmer then the head of that department and also for the valuable learning experience under Freddie Parker and Sonya Stone whom he credits for his effectiveness as an instructor.

Yes, we see that his background shows that he is truly dedicated to AFAM Studies. But how effective would he be as a white instructor of AFAM Studies? The answer lies with his students. With a 50 percent return rate of his African-American students from Fall '89 to Spring '90 taking AFAM 40 and 41, it wasn't hard finding students with nothing but praises for Robert Porter. One

student Zaneta Vaughn, a junior said, "He showed great interest in his teachings and made you feel proud to be an African-American. I did not regret it." Belinda Witaker, a Freshman who took his history class with some emphasis on AFAM Studies as a high school student at a Pre-Orientation Program at North Carolina State said, "He was a great teacher and that there was never a dull moment." Courtney Gallop, Porter's T.A., said, "He is a valuable asset to the AFAM Department in that he is fair, sensitive, and respectful to ideas." One of his former students, Brian Ellerson, raises a thought provoking question: "It makes me wonder why it is so shocking to see a white man teaching Afam? Would I be shocked to see a brother teaching European History. The idea is if African-American history is so precious (for us) it seems that it should be taught by one of us. In fact, African-American history should be taught period. Seeing him puts that reality into perspective and class goes on."

So, still left unanswered is my opening question: What can a white man teach me about the African-American experience? The answer is the same as an African-American instructor. Given an African-American instructor can pull from incidents of racism that directly affected him and present them in a classroom environment, as Robert admits himself. Still there are advantages accredited to him. Robert, as mentioned before, grew up in an African-American neighborhood and can pull from racial incidents that occurred there. Also perhaps the greatest advantage to being a white instructor of AFAM Studies is that he has the opportunity to discover the true opinion of whites intentionally before they know where his sympathies lie. Since racism now is more under the table than out in the open. Those incidents can bring on great classroom discussions.

Robert Porter is a valuable instructor filled with eagerness to learn and to teach. Judging his effectiveness to teach based on color is racism in itself. It should not be the color of the man, but the teachings of the man.

**Eric McAllister is a junior Political Science major from Hope Mills, NC.**

**Express yourself about issues that concern *Black Ink* readers. Articles should be three pages long, typed double spaced (include major, year, and hometown). Drop your article by Suite 108-D Student Union, or mail to *Black Ink*, CB# 5210, Student Union, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27514**

## Is Christianity A White Man's Religion?

When we look at the history of colonialism we gain the knowledge of white missionaries coming into Africa in the name of the Lord to spread Christianity among the indigenous Africans. When one visits a predominantly white church or looks through a pictorial bible, often he/she is confronted with an image of a white-skinned, blond haired and blue eyed Jesus. These images have conditioned us into thinking that Jesus is a white man and therefore Christianity is a white man's religion. Is it true that Christianity is a white man's religion? Before we formulate our conclusion with the images we have been conditioned with, it would be wise to look at the evidence.



Jesus Christ was born and raised in Southwest Asia and was very familiar with the people of Northern African; Christ, more than likely, was dark-skinned. He was born of a Jewish girl and conceived by the Holy Spirit— no human father, so He is not Gentile. Christ is not white.

A close examination of scripture shows that racism, favoritism, and partiality all come under the judgement of God. In the bible we find very few references to color.

Christianity equals Christ and Christ equals God. In John 4:24 the bible says that "God is the spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." What color is spirit? White? Yellow? Red? Black? What color is the spirit of God? Flesh has color, we have color, the spirit does not have color. The spirit (God) does not have color and is not prejudiced or predisposed to any particular color. Christianity therefore is surely not the white man's religion. When we look at the bible, we look at who God is and who Christ is.

From the very beginning of the Christian church, black people were involved. Do you remember when Christ had his cross and was going to be crucified? There was the man named Simon of Cyrene that helped Christ. Where is Cyrene? Cyrene is in North Africa. It is a black man who was to comfort Christ in His greatest hour of need.

In Acts 11, it says that they were first called Christians at Antioch. Acts 13:1 says, "Now they were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul." It goes on to talk about what happened at Antioch. Some of the leaders of the Church of Antioch who were first called Christians, we are told here, were black. Simeon (who was called Niger) is a Latin word meaning "black, or dark-skinned," and Lucius of Cyrene is (as we just discovered) from a North African city.

The leadership of the early Christian church were black people. In fact, the reason they came to Antioch was because the other Christians weren't even sharing the gospel with those who weren't Jews. Africa was sending missionaries to Antioch right at the time of Christ. Christian missionaries were being sent from Africa to Antioch to share Christ with those who were not Jews. Acts 2, on the day of the Pentecost, specifically Acts 2:10 talks about all the people that were in Jerusalem at Pentecost. "[They were from] Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, the districts of Libya and Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes..." There were black people in Jerusalem who were saved many, many years ago.

See "White Man's Religion?" p. 8