

“American History X”

A Theological Analysis by Jin Kyung Park

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*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)*

I. Introduction

The film, “American History X,” attempts to tackle the delicate issue of racism in a society. This film gives us a significant question: How can we as Christians deal with racism? In fact, the Bible does not specifically mention the term,



“racism,” but through diverse messages (Deuteronomy 10:17; Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9 etc.) the Bible has tries to tell us how to deal with it in the modern context. God loves us with His impartiality. All human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). We are equal beings before God and are in deep relationships with others and God. Therefore, racism, as a catalyst of ignoring human being made in the image of God, should be removed from our community (attached picture taken from www.justkidding.dk/wallpaper/film/americanhistoryx/p001.jpg).

In the black-and-white flashback sequences exploring characters, the film tries to approach the limitations and contradictory nature of between humanity and society and the relationships of human beings. Through my theological analysis using the work, “*God-Christ-Church*,” of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, first, I will introduce the characters, the family tree, and the synopsis of the film for a better understanding. Second, I will do a dialogue between Suchocki’s view and “American History X” based on the concept of “sin.” Third, I will try to reconcile a problem of the film based on Suchocki’s

concept of “justice,” and then, I as a Christian will represent my hope through a prayer for the elimination of racism.

Background of the Film, “American History X”

Director: <u>Tony Kaye</u> Producers: <u>Steve Tisch, John Morrissey</u> Screenplay: <u>David Mckenna</u> Music: <u>Anne Dudley</u> Rate (MPAA): <u>R</u> Runtime: <u>119 min</u> Country: <u>USA</u> Language: <u>English</u> Genre: <u>Drama</u> Distributor: New Line Cinema Theatrical Release: October 30, 1998	CAST Derek Vineyard: <u>Edward Norton</u> Daniel Vineyard: <u>Edward Furlong</u> Dennis Vineyard: <u>William Russ</u> Doris Vineyard: <u>Beverly D’Angelo</u> Davina Vineyard: <u>Jennifer Lien</u> Robert Sweeney: <u>Avery Brooks</u> Stacy: <u>Fairuza Balk</u> Cameron Alexander: <u>Stacy Keach</u> Seth Ryan: <u>Ethan Suplee</u> Murray: <u>Elliott Gould</u>
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Characters

Dennis Vineyard: Derek’s Father, who is a LA County Firfighter, inputs his idea of racism to Derek.

Later, he is killed by black drug dealers while putting out a fire at a crack house.

Doris Vineyard: Derek’s Mother who does not give up Derek and continually shows her love to Derek.

Derek Vineyard: The oldest son, who is influenced by his father and Cameron, becomes a virulent white-racist who later learns the errors of his ways. Derek portrays two polar opposite personalities, switching between the racist Derek and the reformed Derek.

Davina Vineyard: Derek’s sister who avoids becoming racist and attends college.

Daniel Vineyard: Derek’s younger brother who idolizes Derek and follows his brother’s racist ideas. He is saved from the D.O.C (“Disciples of Christ”) by Derek, but is later shot by his black schoolmate.

Robert Sweeney: The principal at Venice Beach High School, who helps Derek draw out of his racism, and endlessly assists Vineyard brothers, participates in solving the racial crimes with the police station.

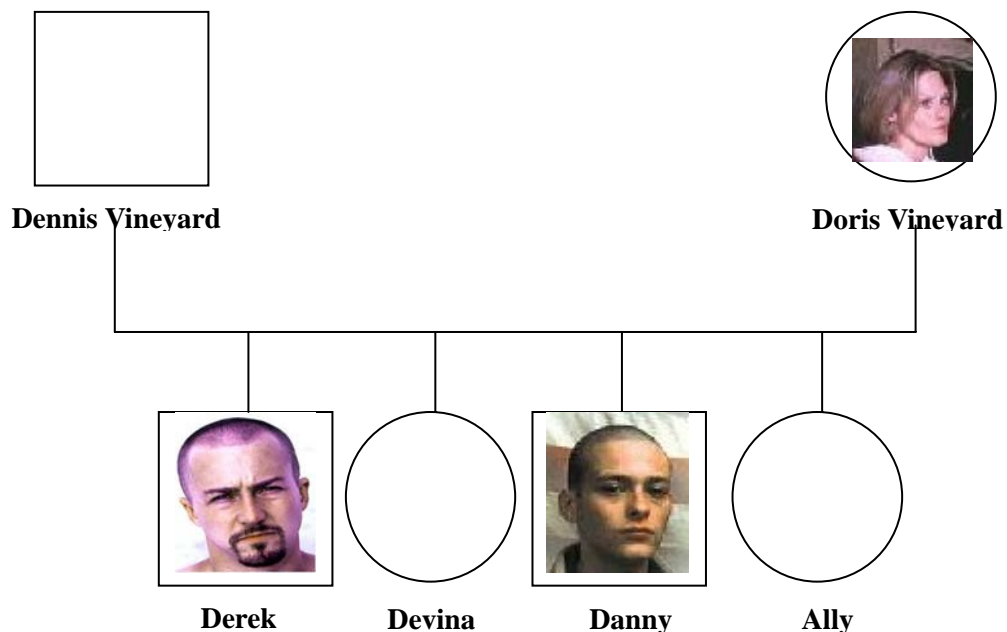
Stacy: Derek's girlfriend is one of the D.O.C. members.

Cameron Alexander: "Cameron Alexander is probably the biggest writer and distributor of white power literature in LA County. He promotes white power bands, writes reviews, columns, all at the ripe age of forty." (Said by a police man in the film)

Seth Ryan: Derek's friend is one of the D.O.C. members.

Murray: He is a Jew and a History teacher who hates the Vineyard brothers, and later becomes a boyfriend of Derek's mother.

Family Tree of Derek Vineyard



Synopsis

Derek Vineyard was a normal high schooler and lived in L.A. around a variety of communities. Through the relational society formed by his father and the D.O.C., he accumulates his view of racism. After his father, a fireman murdered by a black person on drugs during work, Derek becomes a leader of a white racist, skinhead gang.



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He belongs to the D.O.C. under the direction of Cameron who is Neo-Nazi sympathizer and has hatred toward non-whites. He is continually against non-whites, ignores the other race groups made by image of God, and distorts the mutual relationships with others and God. One day, he cruelly kills two black men

trying to steal his car, and is sent to prison for 3 years (all photos copyright New Line Cinemas unless otherwise noted).

Daniel Vineyard, who idolizes his brother (Derek), becomes a member of the D.O.C. after his brother imprisoned. He steps into his brother's shoes. He hates non-whites, proclaims the well-being of only whites, and makes an enemy, a black student, at school. Under the influence of Cameron, he submits a school assignment that he bases on Hilter's "*Mein Kampf*," therefore, he is given a new assignment by Principal Dr. Sweeney called "American History X," which requires him to analyze all of the events surrounding Derek's incarceration.

During his prison term, Derek becomes reformed after meeting a black intimate. After raped by white supremacists, Derek tries to reform himself completely with Sweeney's help. 3 years later, when Derek is released from prison, he finds that his

younger brother followed his racist views. Derek tries to re-build the broken relationship with his family members and others and re-establishes their mutual relationships for his better future.

He also saves his brother from the D.O.C. after living his life consumed by racism, especially hatred to non-whites. Soon after, Daniel is murdered by a black student. The movie ends as Derek tries to confront Daniel's death and an excerpt



from Daniel's revised essay is read that illustrates Daniel's new reformation (attached photo taken from http://edward.j.norton.free.fr/Norton_images/AmHistX/AHX018.jpg).

II. Sin in the Film based on Suchocki's "God-Christ-Church"

The process model stresses the fact that "relationships are internal," not external to existence (p.19). To exist is to be in relation; relation is internal to existence. In relationships we become what we are, and in turn, affect the becoming of others. All existence is interdependent through the process of relationships. In Suchocki's idea of sin which occurs through time and relationship, sin is the violation of the relationship with the self, others, and God. It distorts the well-being of all human beings in their mutual relationships. Through the black-and-white flashback sequences exploring Derek's earlier and later life, we need to approach sins of the societal structure and the characters based on Suchocki's view.

I. The Concept of Sin based on Suchocki's "*God-Christ-Church*"

In the process model, we can approach the notion of sin based on understanding time and relationships. According to Suchocki, sin takes place through time and relationships. First, sin occurs through time. Through time, the societal structure is built up and made concrete. Through time, the cumulative acts which individuals, groups, and societies commit become imbedded in the societal structure. In process theology, the influence of the past is enormous (p.19). The past could be the conveyer of the demonic power for future; on the other hand, it could be the resource for all humanity's well-being in their mutual relationships. For example, when the past, "which is originally an objective reality" of societal demonic power, enters into the "subjective reality" of humanity, it becomes sin (p.17). However, it is not all human beings' sin. It becomes humanity's sin if human beings passively assent to the societal demonic power, if they remain indifferent to the social structure of evil which contributes to racism, and if they are aimed toward conformity to the societal demonic power. In the process model, the societal demonic power is far greater than the individual's (p.17). However, the societal demonic power cannot annihilate all human freedom completely because there is always novelty that leaves freedom and responsibility for human beings (p.17).

Secondly, sin occurs through relationships. It lies in the distortion of the mutual relationship of human relational existence (p.14). That is, sin is a violation of relationships with the self, others, and God. It leads us to be in a state of alienation, the condition of estrangement, from the self, others, and God. Human existence is the

totality of interchangeable relational existence. Focusing on the self is “the denial of relational existence” (p.26). Therefore, the self may think that he/she is the only subject and others are objects. Relationality is fundamental to all existence. Therefore, sin brings not only violation of the harmonized relationship of human existence but also a distortion of all humanity’s well-being.

II. Diverse Sins through the film based on Suchocki’s “*God-Christ-Church*”

Sin of the Societal Structure

The film, “American History X,” shows that through time, the acts of individuals, groups, and societies accumulate in the society and become imbedded in the societal structure of Los Angeles, California. In this area, in Southern California, various big and small ethnic communities live together. There are two small groups in the Venice Beach area that are outspoken white supremacists who are hostile against non-whites. These groups assent to the societal demonic power and imprison in sin as part of the societal structure.

Sin comes from the Neo-Nazi groups, especially the D.O.C. (“Disciples of Christ”) and a white supremacist group in a local prison. The D.O.C. members in the Neo-Nazi society hate non-whites: including blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Jews, and illegal immigrants. They are aimed toward the well-being of only whites, and they distort the reciprocal relationship with the other races. They deny the other races’ dignity made in the image of God, ignore the relational existence of others, and do not care about the

well-being of others. They avoid the potential which can change this situation toward the well-being for all people in harmonized relationships. They conform to the broken relationship with the other ethnic groups and build up their own society, a Neo-Nazi society. They reject the potential to change the situation and stay in social evil, and it becomes their sin.

There is another white supremacist group revealing hatred toward non-white prisoners in prison. They also ignore the mutual relationship with the prisoners of races. The white supremacist group tries to buy their power by giving to the director of the prison in order to increase the power for the whites' dominance in prison. This group neglects any possibility to reform the situation and remain in social evil like the D.O.C.

The non-white races' hatred of the D.O.C. and this white supremacist group in prison carries elements of sinfulness which they take and create themselves through violent actions. It becomes part of them and becomes their sin. They choose to remain in the social evil and are mirrored by the other local ethnic groups. Hostile tribalism spreads out through this society.

Sin of Derek Before His Transformation

From the flashback of Derek's earlier past, we can explore his sin. Earlier, Derek was a normal student and did not have any racial ideas. Through the dinner table conversations with his father, who proclaimed white racism, Derek shaped his racial view. Derek manifested his racism in life, and his racial thought continually produced his sin. Above all, the death of his father was an element which stimulated his racism.

Through Derek's interview about the death of his father murdered by black drug addicts during his work, Derek chose to be a white racist by saying "Look at our country. It's a haven for criminals. Black...brown...yellow... whatever... Every problem in this country is "race" related. Every problem, not just crime. These problems are rooted in the black community, the Hispanic community, the Asian...every non-Protestant group in our society. Immigration...welfare...AIDS... They're all the problems of the non-white." He took this racial view and expressed himself through his participation in the D.O.C. His brutal behavior in the D.O.C. yields his sin and consistently leads him to broken relationships with others.

First, Derek's sin comes from his participation in the D.O.C., which stimulated him to be a white racist. He ignored the well-being of non-whites and broke the mutual relationship with other ethnic groups. To Derek, the non-whites were no longer friends, neighbors, and, even valuable human beings made in the image of God. They were just useless objects in a society who harmed the advancement of whites' well-being. He did not feel any guilt regarding violence against non-whites. His hatred to non-whites is evident in violence. For example, when he invaded an Asian market, he insisted on the well-being of only whites and ignored the well-being for all human beings by saying, "The state spent \$ 3 billion last year on services for people who don't even have a right to be here!" His violent, aggressive behavior to non-whites continually broke the relationship with the other race groups and brought the distortion of well-being for all humanity. His concept of racism and violence became his part of life, and it becomes his sin.

Second, his sin related to racism pursuing Neo-Nazism is evident in his will toward the broken relationship with others, who are not white Protestants and the burden of

whites' advancement. In the table discussion with his family members and Murray, the Neo-Nazi-skinhead Derek strongly proclaimed white supremacy, acting violently to Murray and his own family members, especially Davina. Derek hates Murray because he is Jewish not because he has the possibility for being Derek's step-father and replacing his dead father whom he idolized. Derek acted



violently against his sister because she was against his Neo-Nazism. His huge swastika tattoo on his chest obviously revealed his racial view by saying, "This means 'Not welcome'" to anyone who is against his white racism. His violent, aggressive behavior broke the correlative relationship with family members and Murray, and the broken relationship brings them the pain of the past. In Suchocki's view, relationships are internal to who we are and what each reality is and intertwine our existence. It is obvious that the violation of the mutual relationship with others and the distortion of others' well-being become Derek's sin (attached picture of Ed Norton, "Derek," taken from http://www.dvdtown.com/review/American_History_X/1808/10).

Derek's final sin is also manifested in his crucial murder of two black men who try to steal his car as vengeance for a lost basketball game. His sin comes from his egotism. Suchocki asserts that egotism is sin, for it is a distortion of relational existence (p.25). Therefore, Derek himself is the only subject, and the two black men were just objects, not human beings. He did not feel any guilt when he killed two black men ("I killed two guys, Danny, I killed them. And it didn't make me feel any different."). He felt that only whites are human beings, and others are just objects for

whites. He also completely annihilated the opportunity of two black men to reconcile the broken relationship between them. In Suchocki's view, "every actuality is a center, in which case no actuality can become an absolute center. We are in a universe of centerless centering" (p.25). Derek's ignorance to their subjectivity becomes his part of life and his sin.

Sin of Derek After His Transformation

It is not easy to define exactly the moment when Derek completely reformed. It can be the moment when he met a black inmate in the prison or when he was raped by a white supremacist group or when he met Sweeney in the hospital of the prison after the rape. However, I will deal with Derek's transformation from the moment that he realizes that his racial thoughts are wrong. Through the film, he has slowly undergone transformation. He has reformed the errors of his way of thinking on racism. He repents his vicious murder by saying, "It's wrong and it was eating me up, it was going to kill me...I killed two guys, Danny, I killed them. And it didn't make me feel any different. It just got me more lost and I'm tired of being pissed off, Danny. I'm just tired of it." He realizes that other ethnic people are human beings. Suchocki would agree that Derek's transformation leads him to the "richness of relational existence in community" in later his life (p.6). However, after his transformation, he still imprisons sin which he commits.

After his transformation, his sin occurs through his conformity to the violence of the white supremacist group in prison. The repentant Derek was raped by the white supremacist group that realizes his transformation. In the shower room, there is no one,

but Derek who was still taking a shower. The white supremacists come in, and the director of the prison closes the door and remains indifferent to their violent action. They hold Derek's body and one of the white supremacists rapes him by saying "You wanna be a nigger, sweet boy? We gonna treat you like one." After the rape, Derek does not try to surmount the situation. He just avoids their existences, passively accepts their jeer, and neglects restoring the relationship with them. He should have found another way to cope with the situation. However, he chooses to remain indifferent in the broken relationship with the white supremacists. His conformity becomes his part of sin.

Another sin of the reformed Derek comes from the process of rebuilding the new relationship with his former enemies and friends. Based on Sweeney advice ("Has anything you've done made your life better?"), Derek tries to restore the correlative relationship with his family members and the other race groups which he has lost. He wants to restore the estranged relationships for the reciprocal well-being of which he has lost and violated. However, in order for Derek to save Daniel, who follows in his same tragic footsteps, from the D.O.C., he violently confronts Cameron and Seth and breaks the relationship with them by saying, "I came here for one reason, to tell you that

I'm out, and Danny's out too and if you come near him again, I'll ... kill you." It seems that he overcomes the sinful lure of the Neo-Nazi societal structure as he and his brother secede from the D.O.C. However, he chooses to



remain indifferent in the broken relationship with the D.O.C. and conforms to making them as enemies. He does not regret his violent reaction to them and neglects an opportunity to reconcile the distorted relationship with them. It becomes his sin.

III. Reconciliation: Justice based on Suchocki's "God-Christ-Church"

In the last narration of Daniel, his terms of "Hate is baggage" give us room to rethink another possibility of "hate." If there is the possibility of hate, there may be the possibility of love. In Suchocki's point of view, God is the resource of the full love, and the love of God is to desire the well-being of all human beings in their mutual relationships (p.117). God's love endures hatred, pain, and death, "inexorably reaching toward the well-being of the others" (p.116). Suchocki says, "Christian faith proclaims that we have a double destiny: to live deeply and richly in this life through personal and social structures of love, and to participate everlastingly in the life of God. Both destinies are social in nature: to live in love is to live a social existence, mindful of the needs of all, creating communities of justice" (p.183). To break the great wall of racism in our society and to seek to change the situation in the direction of justice, we need to re-define the concept of justice which can bring the fullness of love for all humanity's well-being in the balanced relationships with others.

Based on the Bible, Suchocki describes that "Justice in the Hebrew scriptures is seen in the concrete caring of the people for each other within society in well-ordered

relationships” (p.88). That is to say, justice is the “full love” which cares for the well-being for all human beings in their mutual relationships. The fullness of love includes “an openness to others that crosses the boundaries we define to divide us, a judgment that opens us to the richness of forgiveness and growth, inviting us to togetherness in giving and receiving” (p.99). We exist in relationships, and we are made by the image of God in relational reality. “God relates to all reality, calling each element in the world toward reflection of a divine image that is love and justice in relationship” (p.98).

Nothing can separate human beings from the love of God (Romans 8:39). God is a just God (Genesis 18:25; Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 99:1-4; Jeremiah 9:24; Isaiah 45:21). His son, Jesus Christ, reveals to us God’s justice and refuses the well-being of the self, but pursues the well-being for all people. Jesus commands us to love each other as He loves us (John 13:34). Jesus insists that we are to love our enemies. (Matthew 6:43-48; Luke 6:27-28, 32-36) In the biblical period, enemies are unclean people, law breakers, Roman soldiers, and Jewish religious leaders, those who insisted to put Him on the cross. But, Jesus in his action shows His love to enemies. He forgives them, embraces their sins, and helps them love each other. Everybody in Jesus is one community creating God’s justice.

The law in the film represents justice. We are equal before the law, and the law is just before all people. However, justice by the law in the film does not appear to function through the society. Racial crimes continually take place through the society, and policemen struggle with racial criminals using the justice of the law. It would be no exaggeration to say that if there is the true justice in a society, we may be able to overcome racism. As Suchocki mentions, justice is the full love to care for each other toward the well-being of all human beings in their harmonized relationships. If human

justice follows God's justice, we may be able to expect human justice to be a medium to eliminate racism in our society.

It is clear that the human justice cannot completely solve racism manifested in the society in the film. The racism in the film is a symbol of injustice. The racism brings the violation of the mutual relationships with others and distorts the well-being of all people. It is against justice and is aimed toward injustice. For example, in Derek's view (before his transformation), only whites can reach justice by saying, "We pull over and trust the law...White people never break the law. We're perfect little angels." He believes that only white people follow justice. However, the true meaning of justice is to care for each other in mutual relationships toward all people's well-being.

Suchocki would suggest that the justice of God becomes a true medium to overcome racism; to include all race, gender, and class; and to open the door to the process of diversity in harmonized relationships. She insists that God has revealed, "God's will toward justice in relationship" through covenants (p.88). In the final scene of the film, Sweeney and a policeman ask Derek to solve the problem about Cameron and Seth, who were attacked. Sweeney seems to know that he cannot end racial crimes through the law alone. However, only Derek's relationship with Cameron and Seth can prevent them from seeking revenge later. Now,



Derek tries to help Sweeney prevent racial crimes and restore broken relationships for the all humanity's well-being. He may be aware of the limitation of human justice and

that we need something more. God's justice can be the source of all human justice (2Chronicles 19:6, 9; Proverb 29:26). Therefore, God's justice re-builds the broken relationships and re-establishes the distorted well-being. It is the openness to God's will of increasing communal well-being.

God's justice is aimed toward the well-being for all human beings including the marginalized and various needy groups such as widows, resident aliens, orphans (Deuteronomy 10:18), the sick, the poor, wage earners, prisoners, and slaves (Job 29:12-17; Psalm 146:7-9; Malachi 3:5). In this sense, God's justice is universal (Psalm 9:7-9). God brings His justice near (Isaiah 46:13) and leads us to follow justice (Deuteronomy 16:20). God is not partial. God loves everybody with impartiality. God made man/woman; colors, size, all of types. We are all the same before God. God's justice is the full love in the mutual relationship with others. Therefore, all human justice can represent God's justice in a society and reject injustice causing the violation of the relationship with diverse people. Also, the whole society will be the realm of God's justice.

VI. Prayer for the Elimination of Racism¹

I look forward to the time in the future history which I will not deal with any racism around the world where everybody in the image of God lives equally and loves each other in mutual relationships for the well-being of all people. How, as Christians, deal with issues related to racism? Believe what Jesus says, do what Jesus commands us as Disciples of Christ, and pray for what Jesus asks us.

¹ <http://www.midwestaugustinians.org>

**To the Creator of all races and peoples, who makes us as His/Her image of God
and loves each of us:**

For an end to discrimination in all its forms, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

That each person may be respected and valued as a child of God, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

That the Church may be a witness and a universal sign of unity among all peoples, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

That each of us may acknowledge our part in mistakes and sins of the past pertaining to discrimination and racism, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

For a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation among peoples who share a history of mutual mistrust, hatred or aggression, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

That the victims of racial prejudice may forgive those who persecute them, and that their persecutors may have a change of heart, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

That the Church will continue to strive to make every element of human life correspond to the true dignity of the human person, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

For those who have struggled in the past and continue to do so today for civil rights, economic justice and the elimination of discrimination based on race, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

For the conversion of the hearts and minds of those who allow another's race to influence their relationships and limit their openness, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

That we may work to influence the attitudes of others by expressly rejecting racial stereotypes, slurs and jokes and be affirming of the cultural contributions of every racial group in our world, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

That we may make a personal commitment to abolish social structures which inhibit economic, educational and social advancement of the poor, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

That we may work for decent working conditions, adequate income, housing, education and health care for all people, we pray ...

Lord of all nations, hear our prayer.

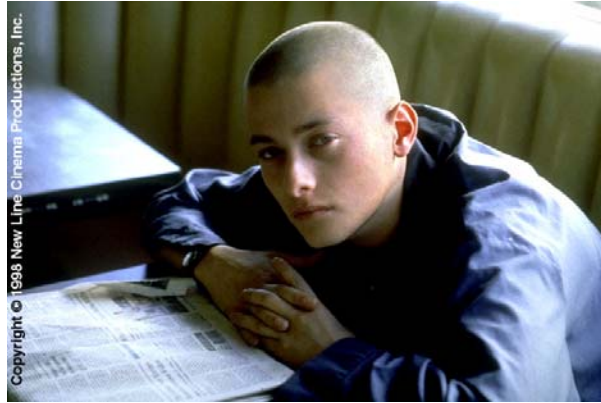
Almighty God, source of our life, we acknowledge you as Creator of all people of every race, language and way of life. Help us to see each other as you see us: your sons and daughters loved into being and sustained by your parental care. Keep watch over our hearts so that the evil of racism will find no home with us. Direct our spirits to work for justice and peace so that all barriers to your grace which oppress our brothers and sisters will be removed. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

III. Conclusion

In my theological analysis, I have explored “sin” of humanity and society through the conversation between the film, “American History X,” which gives us a strong insight about the intolerance of hatred and the futility of racism as understood through the lens of Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki’s “*God-Christ-Church.*” It is probable that God’s justice will overcome racism and allow us to live in mutual relationships for all humanity’s well being. It is probable that our prayer for elimination of racism will

continue to bring us God's love which breaks the barrier of the great wall of racism in our community.

Daniel's message, which is narrated at the end of the film, may reveal our hope and give us room to rethink how we re-establish our new history in mutual relationships based on God's justice.



“We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”