

The Challenges in Addressing White Normativity

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One of the greatest challenges facing the global community is humanity's inability to live in authentic relationships with those considered to be "other," to create what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called the "beloved community."

Such a community, though it has seemed like an unattainable dream, is where all are equal in value, respected and loved, and in which there is no poverty, need or fear of the other, regardless of race, culture, religion, or gender.

Instead of enjoying authentic relationships, we continue to witness xenophobia, intolerance and discrimination due to our fears, perceptions and fallen nature that have helped create our hegemonic systems privileging one group of people over another.

In the United States, our xenophobic fears and intolerant attitudes, stemming from our history, have resulted in a society heavily focused on white privilege, white supremacy and systemic racism.

In other parts of the world, people's fears and intolerance have focused on the large-scale influx of refugees and immigrants from Africa and the Middle East throughout Eastern and Western Europe; or the issue of the First Nations People in Canada; the aboriginal peoples in Australia; or, the tensions between Dominicans and Haitians on the shared Caribbean island of Hispaniola, to name a few.



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Thus white normativity is an issue requiring our immediate attention. Otherwise, we will continue to hurt the hearts of these "others." Religious, racial and ethnic disunity and conflict is one of the three headaches defined by Reverend and Mrs. Moon.

In speaking of white normativity, privilege and supremacy, it is important to clarify one's definition of these terms and their interrelatedness.

White normativity is the defining of cultural practices, attitudes, assumptions, and ideologies in the wider society and culture using the white culture as the standard, the norm. *White privilege* is similar in that there are freedoms, advantages, benefits, access, and opportunities whites enjoy -- consciously and unconsciously -- that are not necessarily enjoyed to the same degree by other ethnicities. *White supremacy* refers to the system of structural or societal racism that privileges whites, whether or not there is racial hatred present. Regardless of the term used, this is a serious issue in creating a beloved community.

This problem has also continued to haunt our faith-based communities. We have been unable to adequately and fully address white normativity or, using a more common term, whiteness. Whiteness refers to all the ways in which the white culture maintains its privileged status and dominance over and above all other ethnicities and cultures. Gender is also included as a target of whiteness because the aspect of difference of non-whites and of women is both grounded in the physical body. For gender, the added rationale of whiteness is that the normative culture being emphasized in whiteness and white supremacy is that of the white male.

One would think that if any group of people could begin to disentangle and ultimately dismantle white normativity it would be the faith-based community. But often it is the religious community that has been in a position to maintain the system of white supremacy and privilege -- consciously or unconsciously. Why? What makes it so difficult for men and women of faith to effectively address white normativity? There are several reasons.

Luther Smith, professor emeritus at Candler School of Theology, comes at the issue from the perspective of racism. He notes three key reasons we have not been able to effectively address or eradicate racism. First, "Racism persists because its oppressive tenets are woven throughout the whole fabric of American history." If that is not enough, Smith notes that racism continues "because a large segment of the population benefits from it." Whiteness scholars hold similar views of racism, noting its pervasiveness is persistent because of the economic, social and political privileges that accrue to whites. Finally, Smith believes racism is allowed to continue simply because it "relies upon it having the personal commitment

of some and the inaction of many."

The subtleties of racism are so deeply intertwined with our thinking, actions, behaviors, attitudes, culture, and way of life that simply stating we are one family under God or that one no longer sees the color of the other's skin is not enough to address racism and white normativity effectively.

At a recent panel session on racism with senior administrators of theological schools and seminaries, a question was raised in reference to the Black Lives Matter! movement: "But don't all lives matter?" An African American panelist responded that until people honestly believe that black men and women are equal to whites and that they count, then the point that black lives matter must be addressed first. I found the point to be profound. To simply state all lives matter glosses over the issue that people of color have not mattered in the same way whites have mattered. Religious people especially like to believe they are color-blind and so they see all people as brothers and sisters under God.

The neuroscientist in me says in answering this question that our neural pathways and "meaning perspectives" are making it difficult for us to change our attitudes and way of being. Neural pathways are composed of the neurons in our brain that communicate around consistent and related themes and concepts. Our meaning perspectives are the frames of reference we have learned to use in assessing meaning in all situations.

Because the process of making meaning is based on both content we learn and our experiences, culture, family, and stories we experience, it is not enough to cognitively learn about the evils of racism, intolerance and xenophobia in order to change our behavior. These pathways and meaning perspectives have been subtly shaped over time. Once a neural pathway has been shaped, it is continually reinforced subconsciously and unconsciously at times. Therefore it cannot be erased or somehow quarantined like a computer virus just because we wish it to disappear or want it to stop influencing our meaning-making processes.

Neural pathways and meaning perspectives need to be actively pruned and consciously addressed, while also forming new perspectives and new neural pathways. It must be an intentional process that involves learning new concepts and ways of being on all levels -- cognitively, emotionally and experientially -- to form new neural pathways and prune old pathways through not behaving as before and not focusing on the same rhetoric and content as in the past.

Whiteness scholars talk about the oppressive tenets of racism being interwoven throughout our history and embedded within the fabric of our society; each one of us has been subtly shaped and reshaped by this experience over time. Our neural pathways and meaning perspectives become so strongly reinforced and continually reshaped over time that we are often not fully aware of what has contributed to our views toward racism and race. Only when we are challenged to critically reflect, openly discuss our perspectives, and deeply internalize concepts around race will we be able to begin to unravel white normativity, privilege and racism. This does not happen overnight.



Robin DiAngelo, author, professor and consultant in the area of whiteness studies and social justice, presents another perspective for why it is so difficult for us to effectively address the issue of white normativity and racism. She puts forth the concept of "white fragility" as a key block to disentangling white privilege and racism. White fragility is a "state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves." She notes the reason for such a defensive action is to "reinstatate white racial equilibrium." Race and ethnicity scholars Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in their book *Racial Formation in the United States*, use the term "habitus" when

speaking of the embeddedness of white privilege such that it has generated clear perceptions, practices and a sense of social subjectivity.

But when someone tries to question or challenge the order of things -- the habitus -- it creates disequilibrium, which then becomes uncomfortable at best and intolerable at worst. White fragility becomes a way to deal with the disequilibrium, a way to return to what is known racially, and to restore the habitus. This is heard through a variety of responses. Common responses from the perspective of white fragility to challenges that one's comments or actions could be perceived as racist include: "I am not racist. I am a good person;" "You're playing the race card;" "That's an example of racial politics;" or, "I've been a victim of reverse racism." Similar statements are made if the challenge concerned is sexism.

Some may question whether those of color and women may not also have formed their own neural pathways around being victims that may impact their perceptions. While there is some truth to that point, the dominant issue is discrimination has been based on real acts of racial intolerance and discrimination in the past, and we can expect to have similar experiences in the present and future until we begin to effectively address systemic racism, white normativity and white privilege. The fact remains that victims of whiteness are not the majority and so do not have the same degree of power as that of the dominant culture.

Another expression of white fragility includes affirmations we live in a color-blind or post-racial world, pointing to Barack Obama's presidency as proof. While we might believe this is a nice dream, the reality is we do not live in a world in which racism is no longer an issue. We have not gone beyond a superficial understanding and simple view of toleration and acceptance. In addition, to say we are color-blind is not healthy. For one, it shields us from recognizing the ill effects of racism and white normativity. Second, it communicates there is something negative about being associated with color and that there is no value to be a person of color. Finally, being color-blind keeps us blind to ourselves. As education professor Shelly Tochluk describes, if we cannot see the color in someone else, we cannot see the "whiteness" issue in ourselves.

More importantly, rather than living in a color-blind world, we need to encourage a more color-conscious world and encourage what sociologist Parker Palmer calls "communities of truth." Communities of truth challenge us to get closer to the other and engage in deep discussion and reflection. As law professor Bryan Stevenson suggests, if we are to experience real transformation, we need to be close or proximate to the challenge and willing to embrace discomfort. What would this mean for the challenge of racism and white normativity? We need to dare to engage in discussion and reflection as to how we allow white privilege to continue and how Caucasians continue to benefit from white normativity.

Finally, I surmise another reason it is so difficult for religious men and women to appropriately address white normativity is because of our assumption that because we are religious, we are, therefore, people who are conscious of our sinful natures and are trying to be good, and who could not possibly be guilty of an attitude so antithetical to our scriptural and theological tenets as that of white privilege and whiteness. As faith-based men and women, we see ourselves as basically good people. As good people who love God, we cannot consciously be racist or do anything that could be perceived as racist because we equate that with being a bad person who cannot see his or her sinful or fallen nature. And godly people are not inherently bad or evil. Whether this is an issue of white fragility, or our inability to recognize how we may unconsciously contribute to white privilege, or our inability to recognize how we may have benefited from white privilege, the result is the same -- white normativity and white privilege continues.

In the midst of such violent acts as we have witnessed in Ferguson, Charleston, Charlottesville, and most recently, Sutherland Springs (Texas) and New York City, I believe we must remain hopeful and make the effort to seek out the beloved community of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This was what Rev. Moon was all about during his life. He was never afraid of challenging discussions and to initiate change.

But much more work needs to be done. As men and women of faith, we should not be afraid to follow his example as we dare to engage in the level of deep reflection and discussions around racism, white privilege, white normativity, and whiteness that is needed. Will it be uncomfortable? Yes. Will it be confronting? Yes. Will it be worth it? Absolutely.

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