



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



HARD: Teaching Against Racism

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Teaching for racial equality, and against oppression, has meant coming to grips with what my adult

students (domestic and international) do not know, i.e. the basic concepts of race and the mechanisms of racism in the United States. Teaching about racial violence, domination and hatred invariably means asking students to re-learn their views on race, as well as to become critically astute concerning issues of Western society and systemic oppression. Institutionalized white supremacy is a delicate and emotional subject.

Many students report that the conversations in seminary courses are their first critical, extended conversation about the “isms” (racism, sexism, classism, etc.). While I am not surprised, I am alarmed. I can but hope that their exposure to these conversations will compel them, in their own communities of responsibility, to lead more life-giving dialogues. If Black lives are ever to matter, we need religious leadership who understand the death-dealing institutions which frame our capitalist democracy and the targeted violence which ensues for the minoritized.

Extended conversations on racism and violence are embedded in my Introduction to Educational Ministries course. The required course, with conversations on attitudes of white supremacy and class privilege, has the reputation of being HARD. I have done little to counter the hallway-chatter because I think (re)learning race identity and the theory of racism is HARD work. It is not a soft, warm and fuzzy dialogue. It does not build self-esteem or use the approach of "I'm OK/You're OK." It is a conversation that most people would rather avoid. It is a conversation I push past triteness, trivialities and pleasantries.

After teaching about racism for these many years, I have a list of concepts for which students have told me, through their comments, silences, and behaviors, is the stuff that has caused the most cognitive dissonance. Rethinking what they thought they already knew - is confounding (HARD).

The biggest and most consistent surprise is that race is not a biological reality. Race is a social construct based upon cultural norms.

Beyond this fact, they are also halted by the following:

- The traditions of race and racism in the USA have a history which needs to be studied. For example, at one point in US history, it was theorized that there were 35 white races.
- Laws and social practices create race based upon differences seen through the lenses of culture. Public policy by federal and state government (e.g. U.S. Constitution, Emancipation Proclamation, Affirmative Action, Civil Rights Act, Voters Right Act, etc.) has been the scaffolding of systemic racism, as well as anti-racist thought.
- Whiteness is not universally normative. The values, mores and behaviors (e.g. beauty standards, gender roles, worldview concerning community) espoused by whiteness are not essentialist. Whiteness is one culture (albeit powerful) in the mosaic of global cultures.

Whiteness is more than skin color or ethnic origin. It is about privilege and access to opportunities, power, and wealth acquisition reserved by public policy and private action for those deemed as white. Housing, wealth, education and inheritance are systemically racialized by public policy.

Differences are not deficiencies. Those of us who are different from white, e.g. African-American, Latina/o, Asian, Native American, etc., do not have to compare ourselves to whiteness for legitimacy of culture or ontological presence. Non-white people are not inherently flawed; we are not divinely created as a holy mistake.

Racial markers (like skin color, hair texture, shape of eyes or nose) are assigned cultural values. The body, then, is the site of violence/de-humanization because it is believed that by viewing the body one can accurately identify race, thus instantly able to assess the power and worth of a person.

And, perhaps the most insidious of all:

Those who benefit the most from racism are oftentimes the least aware and critically articulate about the phenomena of racism. Those with white privilege are privy to the spoils of a racist system even if they are not personally racist. Keeping the oppressors unaware and inarticulate is a strategy of the successful, racist architecture.

At some point during these uncomfortable conversations, I tell my students that I expect them, now armed with this knowledge as well as with an awakening curiosity, to change the world into a less hate-filled place. I assure them that to assist persons with the burden of white supremacy is dangerous work, but ministry in the 21st century demands it. Then – for relief (theirs and mine), I play, “Awake Up Everybody” by Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes.

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