

Faiths' Response to Racism

Theological Dialogue Commission of the Arizona Faith Network

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Racism is antithetical to our Faith Traditions' sacred texts and historic teachings. The founder of Bahá'í, Bahá'u'lláh, said, "Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul..." [Sobhani, 18].

The following definition of racism incorporates the themes found in many faith and secular organizations' definitions. "Racism involves social power and prejudice, the capacity to make and enforce decisions (power) that is disproportionately and/or unfairly distributed. Racism can involve unequal access to such resources as money, education, information, etc. In the United States, racism can best be understood as a system with personal/individual and institutional manifestations. Racism is a system which differentiates between whites and people of color. Because the social systems and institutions in this country are controlled by whites, whites have the social power to make and enforce decisions and greater access to resources" [National Church Dialogue on Anti-Racism]. For this document, AFN is focused on racism in the United States of America, while we recognize that it can be found across the globe and throughout human history. We acknowledge that racism affects all people of color: African-Americans, Native Americans, Latinx communities, Asian Americans, Native Hawai'ian, Pacific Islander, and Middle-eastern Americans. We recognize that we as individuals and as faith communities have been complicit with white supremacy in racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim behaviors. We understand that racism assigns states of experience as racial characteristics. For example, poverty may be considered the result of "laziness," rather than understanding that poverty is one form of oppression caused by racism. "If someone is denied access to education, [Moore says this mindset reasons] perhaps it is because of his or her work ethic or ability to work with others" [Moore, 2]. We confess the fact that racism is both a historical fact of American life and an ongoing reality in our society. The 300+ years of enslavement of black peoples, the enslavement and genocide of indigenous peoples and the ongoing systemic oppression that can be traced to both atrocities; all occurred with complicity - conscious or unconscious - from many of the white Christian churches in the past. We decry the subtle oppressions of lack of resources, education and voice in the public square and we mourn the physical brutality and violence many persons of color continue to experience - all occurring with complicity - conscious or unconscious - from many of faith communities in the present - in every state of our not-quite union.

Nonetheless, our Faiths share values and ways that speak about the Divine that emphasize our common humanity, dignity, and worth. The Abrahamic Traditions share the text, Genesis 1: 26-27, "And God created the human in his image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them" [Alter, 18-9]. Abrahamic faith traditions understand that there is something that reflects the Divine One in every person. "Because people are created in God's image, all human life has special value" [Telushkin, 261]. The founder of Quakerism, George Fox, said, "There is that of God in everyone." The Sanskrit word *Namaste*, means "the Divine in me acknowledges and greets the Divine in you." The Sikh Tradition states explicitly, "The Timeless One doesn't approve of separation or disruption; He doesn't recognize any distance; He believes only in love and appreciates selfless service...God resides in all, therefore every

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individual is linked to the other by the ties of mutual co-operation and co-existence. We are tied with other with an invisible string is this in the hands of God *'In all selves art Thou abiding. In Thee are all sharers; to none dost Thou appear alien'* (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, 97)" [Alag, 21-22]. "Allah tells us in the Glorious Qur'an that the diversity of life, the various languages and colors of human beings, are signs of His Majesty. These are all lessons for us to learn about humility, equality and appreciation of differences. Islam is against all forms of racism and discrimination based on both the revelation and reasoning. Allah said in the Quran, *'O people, We have created you male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another. Verily, the most noble of you to Allah is the most righteous of you. Verily, Allah is knowing and aware.'* Quran (49:13)" [Faja, 2/27/18]. And every faith tradition has a form of what in the U.S we call the Golden Rule. In contrast, "Racism ascribes false values to human difference. Therefore, it is inherently sinful. The true evil of racism gives license to the use of power to dominate others" [The Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, 1].

Most of the world's religions arose in geographies where skin colors of those indigenous peoples were not white. The distinctives that are drawn between people in our sacred texts are religious and moral, not ethnic nor racial. There are passages that speak of God intervening on behalf of all peoples: Amos 9:7, Isaiah 2:3-4, Jonah 4:10-11, Zechariah 8:20-22, Colossians 3:9-11, Romans 10:11-13, Qur'an Sura 17:70, see also, Sri Guru Granth Sahib, 469). Telushkin calls the Amos passage cited above, "what may well have been the first explicit repudiation of racism in any literature" [Telushkin, 269].

Therefore, the issue in the early texts of the Jewish faith, Islam or Christianity is how we treat each other. There are over 100 admonitions to welcome the stranger; often with the reminder "You were strangers once yourself." Yet in human history and in U.S. society today, we have not welcomed the "other" and have excluded and persecuted the "other. Christian ethicists Stassen and Gushee use one definition of racism as an issue of justice and reconciliation. They discuss racism as a source of violence and death, explicit hate crimes, disproportionate incarceration rates and death sentences, lower life expectancy, disproportionate depression and lack of self-worth, lower educational rates, environmental degradation in neighborhoods where persons of color reside, economic disparities, and all forms of power imbalances. Our sacred texts speak to how painful it is to be the stranger, the other, the one who is marginalized, oppressed, and victimized. These texts also define the responsibilities of those with power in society. Most of injustices are linked - cause and effect and cause - to the exclusion from community. Jewish ethicist, Joseph Telushkin cites Leviticus 24:22, "You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen: for I am the LORD your God" and the Talmud's formalized principle of equality, "...the law must treat you all equally' (Ketubot 33a)" [Telushkin, 406]. "Allah said in the Quran, *'Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Verily, in that are signs for people of knowledge.'* Qur'an (30:22)." Abu Nadrah reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said in the final days of the Pilgrimage: *'O people, your Lord is one and your father Adam is one. There is no favor of an Arab over a foreigner, nor a foreigner over an Arab, and neither white skin over black skin, nor black skin over white skin, except by righteousness. Have I not delivered the message?'* (Musnad of Imam Ahmad) [Faja, 2/27/18].

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These exclusionary justice issues are categorically addressed within the Hebrew Bible (Leviticus 19 and Isaiah 58 are but two examples) and within the Qur'an (Sura 5:32, 17:70, and 49:13). For Christians, exclusionary injustice is antithetical to the teachings of Jesus and to our record of Christ's own behavior among us. He healed and taught Romans and Phoenicians. His ministry took him to Tyre, Sidon and Perea. The appearance of the Spirit of God in Acts 2 is multilingual and multinational (Acts 1:4; 2:1-13). These concepts of equality and inclusion are developed in the writings of Paul and James in the Christian Bible (Eph. 2:11-22, Col. 3:11, Galatians 3:26-28, James 2:1-13, for example).

Some faiths such as Sikhism and Bahá'í have explicitly addressed racism within their sacred texts because these sacred texts are reacting to events and society where race was and is a social construct in that culture at the time the texts were composed after the C17th. For example, elimination of prejudice of all kinds is a stated principle of the Bahá'í Faith.

Yet we acknowledge that there are many causes of racism: fear of the other; the sociological concept of tribalism; fear of loss of control/power; the role of human need for control, acceptance, and security. In the global north, racism has an additional element; people have been demonized by an artifact of conflating the Germanic-based words for that which enables sight, the least intense color tonality, and the lowest density of melatonin in the skin. For over 1000 years, that has led to "light" meaning good and "dark" meaning bad in the gestalt of Northern European influenced cultures. This resulted in the demonization and therefore, persecution of persons of color. The use of language remains an on-going tool of racism.

In addition, one of the on-going injustices of racism is that historical wrongs have been inadequately addressed, written out of our histories, and forgotten (deliberately or through neglect and inattention or lack of concern). "Failure to face the wrongs of the past almost always signals a lack of readiness to live in justice and yes, reconciliation, today" [Stassen, 399]. Two values shared by all faith traditions are honor and truth. They compel us to acknowledge that in the late C19th all the way into the 1960s Northern Hemisphere science was usurped by persons endeavoring to support racism through dubious scientific practice [Offit, 97ff]. Worse, some persons of faith adopted these reports because they supported their own preconceived prejudices. During Jim Crow, KKK members were mainly "church people." This same tendency to look for things that support our own vested interests have led some people of faith to misuse their own sacred texts, taking statements out of context, reading into scriptures rather than applying scripture. The Greek word *ethnos* "living in a different area," was translated "race". This had political and economic overtones and was pulled out of context by persons seeking to justify slavery and racial oppression; including Nazi Germany. Under the Nazis (a shortened form of *nationalsozialist* or "national" socialist), 6 million Jews were murdered based on the Nazi Party's stated belief that Jews were an "inferior 'race'" along with 3 million others considered "inferior." We reject the construct of white supremacy.

The great tragedy today is that many faith traditions continue to be complicit in the structures that create, embed, permit, and perpetuate societal racism. In our North American highly individualistic culture, many congregations face an additional barrier to reconciliation, and thus a continuance of institutional racism. Americans within faith traditions that have a concept of "sin" tend to focus on "my sin" and how "I should turn back to God." "Salvation for American

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Christians is a transaction between two individuals - themselves and God. *This oversimplification of sin does not make sense of systemic, corporate evil, brokenness, and social maladies*” (italics are in the original) [Moore, 2]. Yet, Biblically, there is also a strong emphasis on the communal aspect of sin. In the past 100 years, this emphasis has come to be called social sin in Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox writings and collective or corporate sin in other Mainline and Evangelical documents. Secular philosophers name this collective oppressive behavior “Structural Oppression.” The corporate group that we participate in and are responsible for includes our families, our congregation, our local governments, our national government, and our society’s very gestalt. The Catholic Church has a very clear definition of social sin, “The sinfulness of society into which a person is born. Its premise is that modern socialization and collectivization have immersed everyone in other people’s values and moral actions to an unprecedented degree.” All members of a society are complicit in its institutional injustices. “Torah committed Israel to a life of society free of the inequality and exploitation that characterized its own existence in the Egyptian land of bondage. Whenever Israel tolerated the oppression of the poor, of orphans, widows and immigrants, the prophets accused the people of collective infidelity to God. To know God was to do justice (Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah). Jesus himself included in his mission the release of captives and the liberation of the oppressed (Luke 4.18–19)...Sin has both a personal and a social dimension; and the two are interrelated...social sin refers to institutionalized injustice” [New Catholic Encyclopedia]. “In today’s racialized America, to do nothing is to be complicit with evil. A church committed to anything less than the full and just protection of the image of God in everyone equally, fails to be the church of Jesus Christ” [Theological Declaration..., 3]. We reject the idea that as individuals we have no responsibility for the structural and institutional behaviors of the society in which we live.

However, our faith traditions have also been the source of anti-racism work. Our faiths ask us to look at the intersection of religion and politics and ask who has the power to impose. Throughout history, this intersection has not been good. The Story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis is about people trying to gain power through an attempt to reach the heavens, rather than caring for each other. Our Abrahamic faith traditions understand this to be a form of idol worship. Instead, our faiths call us to greater unity. “Abu Hurairah (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated: The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said, ‘*God does not look at your figures, nor at your attire but He looks at your hearts and accomplishments*’ (Sahih Muslim)” [Faja, 2/27/18]. When Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets”(Matthew 22:37-40; NRSV), he was quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, “and you shall love the Lord your Gd with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might,” and Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor [fellow] as yourself, I am Gd” (TANAKH). The latter verse has been called the “major principle of the Torah” [Rabbi Akiva, Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim*, 9:4]. The Unity Declaration on Racism and Poverty has used the Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), the German Evangelical Church’s resistance to anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany, as a model of corporate congregational responsibility and resistance to racism. The Roman Catholic Church has stated, “we are called to constantly examine our own hearts and consciences for how we might contribute to or break down racial divisions, intolerance, and discrimination” [Department of Justice..., 1].

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Many congregations across our Faith Traditions express the breadth of humanity through their diverse cultures. “Islam is a universal religion for all people and for all times. Muslims come from all background and continents. In the heart of a Muslim, there is no place for racism and arrogance” [Faja, 2/27/18]. Many of the Civil Rights Movement leaders and participants were clergy and laity from across Faith Traditions: ecumenically and interfaith. Martin Luther King’s vision of the Beloved Community has taken on a renewed resonance in response to white supremacy’s emergence from the shadows and tacit support from those in political power. “The Beloved Community is the body within which all people can grow to love God and love the image of God that we find in our neighbors, in ourselves, and in creation. It provides a positive, theologically and biblically based ideal that orients the work of racial healing, reconciliation and justice” [Becoming the Beloved Community..., 2]. In 2006, Mormon Church President Gordon B. Hinckley spoke to Church leaders and specifically addressed racism with these words: “Let us all recognize that each of us is a son or daughter of our Father in Heaven, who loves all of His children. . . . [T]here is no basis for racial hatred among the priesthood of this Church. If any within the sound of my voice is inclined to indulge in this, then let him go before the Lord and ask for forgiveness and be no more involved in it” [Hinckley, 58]. The Bahá’i have a number of national and local programs geared towards healing racism using such diverse methods as the arts, including a national Race Unity Day observed since 1957. The ecumenical organization, The YWCA, has a 2017 initiative “Stand against Racism.”

“Paul Tillich states, ‘The intrinsic claim in everything is that it cannot be violated with violating the violator.’ The oppressor is eventually as destroyed by his acts as is the oppressed. The implication of this fact is that racism is every single person’s problem” [The Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, 1].

The Human Genome Project has demonstrated that biologically, we physiologically really are all brothers and sisters descended from one common ancestress; what our sacred texts have already told us. “It is significant that the rise of racist ideologies in nineteenth-century Europe was based on the repudiation of the biblical account of creation and the theory that races have separate origins without a common ancestor” [Telushkin, 262]. “Living the essence of our faith means respecting diversity—cultural, social, religious and political. God identifies learning from one another as the primary goal of diversity (Quran 49:13).” [Unal].

Racism is antithetical to our Faith Traditions’ sacred texts and historic teachings. The English word imitate comes from the Latin *imitat-*, *imitari* ‘copy’; which is related to *imago* ‘image’. Our shared understanding of the Divine is of one who is relational and invites us to be relational, too. In the Christian tradition, this is exemplified by Galatians 3:28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (NRSV). But the elimination of racism should not be equated with assimilation or homogenization; rather with unity. Orin Lyons of the Onondaga Indigenous People of New York, speaking at an event at the Heard Museum, said, the more appropriate understanding of the American dream is not a melting pot but a mosaic, where every piece retains its own unique beauty and the whole picture is beautiful, too. “Racism cannot be addressed until those of us who benefit from it, knowingly and unwittingly alike, acknowledge our privilege and own our responsibility to work toward surrendering it” [Horan, 2]. Addressing racism is a task of faith and of relationship. “It also requires conversation, learning, sharing stories, establishing

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friendships and becoming allies” [Stassen, 401].

Reflection Questions:

When you were growing up, when did you first become aware that such a thing as racism/prejudice/bigotry existed [YWCA, Stand Against Racism]?

How are you and your faith community engaging with issues of racism and white privilege?
What is the best thing you have done so far [Queries of the InterMountain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends]?

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