

RACISM, PRIVILEGE, & FAITH

Working Definitions

Power – the capacity to move freely, control the environment, and influence others in a social context or community.

Prejudice – pre-existing bias against a particular person or group without reference to personal character or experience.

Privilege – a group or individual's socially granted, unearned advantage over others based on arbitrary characteristics of race, gender, orientation, age, or inheritance.

Racism – the systemic combination of social *prejudice* with *power* by which one group preserves its *privilege* by oppressing others based on an arbitrary social hierarchy of race or ethnicity.



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Dominant Culture – the most influential culture of a region against which all other cultural groups in the same region are socially evaluated.

White Culture – the dominant, assimilating culture in the United States — and arguably the world right now — with value systems rooted in the legacy of Western European and North American colonialism of the past 500 years.

Passing – the ability of an individual or group to be considered “white” despite having a heritage outside the dominant white culture.

White Supremacy – an oppressive manifestation of the values of *white culture* that seeks to sustain dominance over, assimilate, or, in its most virulent form, destroy all “non-white” cultural groups.



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White Culture – Characteristics:

- Values individualism
- Asserts “objectivity”
- Emphasizes legalism and reason, often over and against emotion
- Prioritizes materialism and accumulation of wealth
- Awards “productivity” and de-values contemplation
- Relationships are fundamentally transactional and contractual
- Assimilates other cultural groups that adapt to this value system
- Emphasizes the aesthetics and tastes of Western European cultures



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Shadows of White Culture – that nurture White Patriarchal Supremacy

- Suspicious of time, process, and value systems that cannot be quantified or easily measured
- Dualisms become essential and ambiguity becomes intolerable: win/lose, strong/weak, good/bad, legal/illegal, capitalist/socialist, right/left, democracy/communism, ally/enemy, black/white
- Sees social context and political process primarily as a means to advance *individual* ambition
- Erases history and diversity as part of the process of assimilation
- Emphasizes the perspectives, history, and accomplishments of white men
- Tokenizes and commodifies other cultures and individuals
- Resists white identity as a distinct culture / worldview (suffers from unexamined triumphalism and colonialist thinking)
- Easily retreats to denial and victimization if critiqued
- Constructs and sustains an economy that is foundationally disposable, extractive, and exploitive
- Relies on violence as a means of control and a response to threats, real or perceived
- Uses democracy as a veneer for the conservation of power and privilege

From a parish conversation at Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California, facilitated by Br. Richard Edward Helmer, BSG, Summer 2020. © 2020



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American Racism – a form of *racism* that emerged in the late eighteenth century out of Western European colonialism that maintains *power, privilege, and property* in the hands of landed colonial (Western European) gentry and their descendants through systematic and systemic inequity. American racism is characterized by:

- White Supremacy, the shadow of white culture, as an organizing principle for economic, political, and social institutions, including Christian churches
- The social construction of a pseudo-scientific, racial hierarchy based largely on skin color, with African slaves and their descendants at the bottom of the hierarchy. Standing in this hierarchy predetermines *privilege* and opportunity and the limits of acquired *power*.
- An inheritance from Western European anti-Semitism and anti-Catholic Protestantism.
- The commodification of human labor, originating in indentured servitude and the African slave trade.
- The conservation of patriarchal power structures, particularly in the nuclear family and political hierarchy.
- The elevation of wealth and property as fundamental values. Privilege, power, and freedom can be, to a certain extent, purchased, and can conflict with the racial hierarchy.

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Christian Antidotes to White Patriarchal Supremacy, the Shadow of White Culture, and its Racism

- Humility (a “fruit of the Spirit”) – the willingness to see what is real, including our own fallibility, sin, and finitude, leading to ongoing personal and social repentance
- Salvation as *healing* rather than *personal glory*, which embraces relational process as intrinsically valuable, rather than a means to an end
- Love - the primary Christian virtue marked by:
 - The conscious suspension of condemnatory judgment and its roots in ignorance, arrogance, and enculturated prejudice
 - Personal sacrifice – the willingness to relinquish power for the sake of the other (the witness of Jesus and the Cross)
 - Compassion – empathetic living that seeks to relieve suffering and promote well-being
 - Social concern – at the expense of individual ambition and accumulation
 - The “spirit of the law” over the “letter of the law” as a vehicle of mercy, reconciliation, and healing for the social and individual life
 - Wisdom gained from contemplation, prayer, and conversation that leads to right action in partnership with God
- Attention to the margins and edges of society rather than the power centers, including the power centers of the faith – grace is most manifest in relationship to the stranger, the foreigner, the immigrant, the alien, the poor, the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned, the dispossessed, etc.
- The Church as a new, emerging family and society of God that subverts the boundaries and structures of violence and oppression and stands lovingly and prophetically against the “powers and principalities” of dominant culture
- Resistance to the oppressive value of power – love supplants power, privilege, domination, and violence with the empowerment of others, putting others first, non-violent forms of resistance to oppressive structures, and active organizing for peace
- Values diversity over assimilation: God’s love is sufficient to bind together a diverse human family, world, and cosmos.

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Sources of Power – Tools for Understanding What is Happening

Power – the capacity to move freely, control the environment, and influence others in a social context or community.

- **FORMAL AUTHORITY:** The power that derives from a formal position within a structure, that confers certain decision-making prerogatives.
- **EXPERT/INFORMATION POWER:** The power that derives from having expertise in a particular area or information about a particular matter.
- **ASSOCIATIONAL (OR REFERENT) POWER:** The power that derives from association with other people who have power.
- **RESOURCE POWER:** The power that derives from the control over the procedures by which decisions are made, separate from the control over the decisions themselves. This is the power of a judge in a jury trial, for example.
- **SANCTION POWER:** The power that derives from the ability – or perceived ability – to inflict harm on a person or group or to interfere with a person's ability to realize his or her interests.
- **NUISANCE POWER:** The power that derives from the ability to cause discomfort to a party, falling short of the ability to apply direct sanctions. This is often the first power used by the oppressed to push for change.
- **HABITUAL POWER:** The power of the status quo, which rests on the premise that it is normally easier to maintain a particular arrangements or course of action than to change it.
- **MORAL POWER:** The power that comes from an appeal to widely held values. Related to this is the power that results from the conviction that you are right.
- **PERSONAL POWER:** The power that derives from a variety of personal attributes that magnify other sources of power, including self-assurance, the ability to articulate one's thoughts and understand one's situation, one's determination and endurance, and so on. Charisma, charm, and poise are all forms of personal power.
- **SOCIAL POWER:** The combination of formal power, association power, resource power, procedural power, sanction power, and habitual power. Social power combined with prejudice of any kind creates oppression.
- What other forms of power can you think of?

Adapted from a resource from the Antiracism Committee of the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church, 2003

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Respectful Communication Guidelines

R = take **RESPONSIBILITY** for what you say and feel without blaming others.

E = use **EMPATHETIC** listening.

S = be **SENSITIVE** to differences in communication styles.

P = **PONDER** what you hear and feel before you speak.

E = **EXAMINE** your own assumptions and perceptions.

C = keep **CONFIDENTIALITY** (Share **CONSTRUCTIVELY** to uphold the well-being of the **COMMUNITY**).

T = **TRUST** ambiguity because we are **NOT** here to debate who is right or wrong.

Source: The Kaleidoscope Institute & Eric H.F. Law

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Mutual Invitation

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:

The leader or a designated person shares first. After the person has spoken, he or she then invites another person to share. (Who you invite does not need to be the person next to you.) After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share.

If you are not ready to share, say “I **pass** for now” and proceed to invite another to share. We will invite you to share later on.

If you don't want to say anything at all, simply say, “**pass**” and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited.

We invite you to listen and not to respond to someone's sharing immediately. There will be time to respond and to ask clarifying questions after everyone has had an opportunity to share.

Source: *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb* by Eric H.F. Law

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