

Ten myths white people believe about racism

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Critical Essay

It's not our problem. Education can fix it. Only extremists are racist.

by Carolyn B. Helsel

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Predominantly white churches may be hesitant to talk about racism. Some may fear saying the wrong thing or not getting it right. Others may assume their congregation does not need to talk about racism, since they do not see their members reflecting racist actions or beliefs. Even if a predominantly white church views itself as socially progressive and talks about concepts such as systemic racism, persons in these congregations may still harbor illusions about racism that prevent a deeper understanding of the problem. The following myths often arise or lurk near the surface in white people's discussions of racism.

Myth 1: Racism is not our problem. This perspective can be seen in the question "Why do we need to talk about that?" The assumption is that we, in our faith community, are not racists.

A helpful way to expand listeners' capacity to see racism as everyone's problem is to name some of the implicit biases that people may not even notice: pulling your purse closer to you when in an elevator with a black man; walking to the other side of the street when you see people of color coming your way; feeling afraid or nervous when you are around people of color; assuming a person of color must be guilty of a crime when they're pulled over or arrested by the police; jumping to conclusions about a person of color stealing something that

you may have misplaced; or feeling the impulse to ask people of color “Where are you from?” (meaning a different country) when you do not ask whites the same question. These examples highlight the subtle ways implicit bias is still at work.

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Another way of framing racism as *our* problem is to identify the advantages white people may experience. In other words, name not just the negative side of the impact of racism on communities of color, but also the way white people have benefited from years of racism. These privileges may be different for whites who experience other aspects of their identity as marginalizing, but there are enough examples that it is possible for even the most disadvantaged white person to be able to relate to at least one of them.

Myth 2: Racism is about hateful actions and words. If racism were just about mean actions and words, then we could easily say this is not about us; we ourselves do not harbor racist beliefs or say racist things (at least to people of color). Two problems arise from this belief. The first is that it assumes that we are the best judges of whether we are racist or not. The second is that it misses a whole world of data that shows less obvious factors in racial inequality and discrimination.

Racism is more than someone calling a person of color by a terrible name. It is also seen in differences in pay, housing discrimination, mortgage lending, school segregation, and rates of policing and incarceration. White people may not feel that we have anything to do with these larger problems, but our silence is part of the problem. Our acceptance of the status quo makes these injustices harder to challenge. While racism is certainly seen in hateful actions and words, it is also seen in our inaction and silence regarding the larger social problems that stem from our racist history and continue because of our indifference.

Myth 3: Only Ku Klux Klan members and self-proclaimed white supremacists perpetuate racism. It is easy to envision the “bad guys” when it comes to talking about racism—men wearing white sheets and pointy hats, burning crosses in yards. Or we think of the images of young white men chanting “Blood and soil!” in Charlottesville in the summer of 2017.

The moment we point away from ourselves to some other person or group as the “real racists,” we become like the self-righteous character in Jesus’ parable who declares, “God, I thank you I am not like other people” (Luke 18:11). The moment we catch ourselves making that distinction, we need to remind ourselves to be more like the tax collector in the story, asking,

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). Even when we are faced with great opposition in talking with other white people about racism, we need to remember that we are no different from those people. We share the same benefits from the sinful legacy of racism.

Racism is evident not only in hateful actions but in silence and inaction.

Myth 4: Racism has to do with intentions. If we have no intention of offending someone else and no consciousness of racial bias, then we may feel resentful for being accused of racism. If we are generally good people who feed and clothe the homeless and give our money to the poor, it can feel as if we are being unjustly accused of racism when the rest of our behavior shows our moral intentions.

Unfortunately, great harm comes to others not simply by our *intentions*, but by our *inattentions*. If we are not paying attention to how others are harmed by large social forces that may be out of our personal control but nevertheless benefit us in unjust ways, our inattentiveness to these social forces can be hurtful. Paying attention to the ways racism continues to unjustly privilege white people and disadvantage people and communities of color enables us to see racism as much bigger than our intentions. Separating intention from inattention means that if we say something that inadvertently hurts someone else, we do not need to get defensive. Instead, we can say, “I’m so sorry. I did not realize what that would sound like or feel like for you.” We can use the experience as a learning opportunity to see life from another’s point of view.

Myth 5: Racism is caused by ignorance. We cannot blame racism on ignorance, because we perpetuate it even when we should know better. To say racism is only about ignorance denies the ways racism is perpetuated even by those who denounce white supremacy and seek to work against it.

It also ignores the fact that racism has been justified and defended by persons who have received many years of education. Scientists have claimed to demonstrate the inferiority of other races to Caucasians by pointing out head circumference and other physiological “proofs” for the white man’s superiority. Trained clergy with academic degrees argued for the legitimacy of slavery on religious grounds. Lawyers made cases for “separate but equal” schools for children of color segregated from white children. White politicians with college degrees have labeled entire countries of black and brown populations with derogatory terms. Even at the highest levels of academia, persons of color continue to experience racism from those who are bearers of the intellectual torch.

Myth 6: Racism is irrational. This myth assumes that racism does not make sense and that it is based on faulty ideas about the racial superiority of whites over nonwhites. But what do we mean by *rational*? Sometimes we operate out of a rationality of common sense that includes “what serves our best interests.” As a white person, if you’ve been given the choice to live in a good neighborhood with excellent schools for your children where your house is likely to appreciate in value, would it not be rational for you to want to live there if you can afford it? If developers want to build apartments in the neighborhood that will increase the availability of low-income housing, giving more people access to these great schools, it may seem just as

rational to want to protest such development. After all, you do not want your children's schools overcrowded, and maybe you fear the possibility of increased crime in your neighborhood or even your home value declining. These responses may all seem rational, but at the same time they perpetuate a system of racial exclusion.

The way racism perpetuates itself is often through these subtle avenues. We fail to consider how our prejudices operate to preserve our own self-interests. It is completely rational for us to want the best schools for our children. It is completely rational to want our home investments to increase in value. But how do we respond to persons for whom the color of their skin prevents them from buying a home in the best school districts or getting a mortgage for a home they can invest in?

Myth 7: Racism can be remedied through education. Unfortunately, education cannot solve all of our problems. We are selfish. Even if we know we should be less selfish, it does not make it any easier for us to want to share with others. Even if we have been educated in liberal schools, it does not prevent us from operating out of our unconscious biases. Even if we have been taught to recognize that the stereotypes about people of color are not true, we may still respond physically out of deep prejudices when we are least aware. Learning the right definitions of racism or using the most up-to-date terms will not inoculate us against continuing to act in racist ways or contributing to racial inequity.

Some people have never had the advantages of an education and yet have led the way in antiracism and kindness toward all people. If we assume racism can be remedied through education, then we are assuming a privileged status for those who are educated, as if those with education are more virtuous or have a greater capacity to be good.

Myth 8: Racism will end as we have more and more interracial relationships. While it is important for our congregations to become more diverse, it will not be enough to end racism. Traci West, in her book *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*, writes about her experiences as an African American in white congregations where she was repeatedly told that she had a beautiful voice, though she was actually self-conscious about not having a good voice. Because she was the only African American in these congregations, these awkward interactions and the assumptions behind them left West feeling even further marginalized.

Even within multicultural faith communities, racism has opportunities to operate. Sociologist Korie Edwards conducted a study of a multiracial congregation to see how whites and people of color negotiated their relationships in the church community. Edwards found that whites continued to remain dominant in power positions in the church, even when their percentage of overall membership declined to the point of being a minority within the church. In other words, racism exists even in multicultural contexts, and it is important to keep talking about it even when we have made significant progress in becoming a more integrated church and society. White people in particular need to continue to examine our own racism and how it may be at work even when we have a lot of interracial relationships.

Racism can continue to operate even within multicultural faith communities.

Myth 9: Racism is not something that impacts my friends of color. If your friends of color do not share with you their experiences of discrimination, it does not mean that such experiences have never happened to them. There are many reasons why persons of color may choose not to share such stories with others. Even if your friends of color tell you racism does not impact them, there are still many others for whom racism is a daily threat to their well-being.

A related sentiment is that people of color benefit from talking about racism—that they have a “race card” they can play to their advantage. Anne Cheng has written about the race card and its meaning for persons of color. She asks, “What does it mean that the deep wound of race in this country has come to be euphemized as a card, a metaphor that acknowledges the rhetoric as such yet simultaneously materializes race into a finite object that can be dealt out, withheld, or trumped?” She points out the irony that the liability of race has come to stand for an asset: a special card.

To respond to this sentiment, it can be helpful to highlight recent statistics about the impact of race on one’s ability to secure a mortgage from a bank or pass wealth on to one’s children, to be shown homes one is interested in buying or renting, to get interviewed for a job, or to live a long life with access to quality health care—or, conversely, one’s likelihood of being stopped by the police.

Myth 10: Racial discrimination is against the law; what else can we do? While overt racial discrimination is outlawed, there are ways in which laws continue to enable such discrimination to take place. Michelle Alexander has argued that the harsh drug laws of the 1980s’ War on Drugs have resulted in the mass incarceration of men of color through prison sentences and felony convictions that justify the same kind of discrimination allowed legally under the Jim Crow laws of 1877–1950: housing discrimination, job discrimination, and the inability to vote.

There are some state and federal laws that have been (or should be) put into legislation requiring greater accountability for police officers’ use of deadly force. There are laws that can address the unequal sentencing practices and the detrimental effect of over-policing poor neighborhoods. More laws are certainly still needed, but laws will not be enough. The relationship between legislation and racism is always complex and yet interrelated. We need to advocate for greater racial justice in every area of our society and at all levels of government.

This exercise of naming ten myths and misperceptions about racism may help us better prepare for the challenges of talking about racism in white contexts.

Of course, the answer to these myths is not simply telling another person, “What you are saying is a myth.” The solution is more difficult and more relational. It involves conversation, listening, and respect. The more we can help one another understand the complexity of the problem, the closer we can get to addressing it. Awareness of these myths helps us paint a more nuanced picture, inviting listeners to see more deeply the many facets of racism that contribute to the fissures in our community and inspiring change in congregations.

Read the author's list of [ten strategies for preaching about racism in mostly white churches](#).

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Ten myths about racism." It was adapted from Carolyn B. Hessel's forthcoming book, [Preaching about Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders](#), just published by Chalice Press. Used by permission.

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