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The Challenge of Racism for Christians and the Church

Evelyn L. Parker

What are the main challenges about the protection of human dignity and human rights today for churches worldwide? I posit that racism, found in every region around the globe, is the main challenge to the protection of human dignity and human rights for churches. All challenges to the church—including trafficking in women and children, climate change, nuclear disarmament, statelessness, and economic inequality—are connected to racism. We live in a world where human beings engage in pious practices each day yet simultaneously render other human beings as less than human through daily acts of racial macro- or microaggressions.

Racism challenges churches to question how we justify trauma inflicted on people because of the colour of their skin, their culture, or their national origin. Why do Christians tolerate violence or remain silent when their governmental and religious leaders develop and implement death-dealing policies that harm, hinder, or destroy other people? How does the church take authority to maintain the human dignity and human rights of all persons in the human family in a world governed by racism and white supremacy? I offer reflections on the above questions as a womanist practical theologian concerned about issues of practice and embodied beliefs at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality using theological anthropology and ecclesiology as areas of discourse related to Christian practices. I hope to fertilize the soil for new life-giving conversations, action, and policies at the WCC 11th Assembly in Karlsruhe, Germany. Racism is the primary challenge of the church worldwide.

In order to understand how to centre anti-racist work in the churches, we must first define what we mean by racism, white supremacy, and racial discrimination. Racism as “a system of advantage based on race” has been the definition that I have consistently embraced upon reading Beverly Daniel Tatum’s book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

*And Other Conversations about Race.*¹ Tatum appropriates David Wellman's definition, noting that racism is more than individual prejudice: it is an ideology that informs beliefs, values, and cultural norms to the advantage of those who have power and privilege (that is, white privilege).

Racism is a system with an ideology through which “we are taught to represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of social existence.”² White supremacy is a “system of individual, institutional, and societal racism in which whiteness—that is, ‘white’ bodies and cultural and social practices associated with those deemed ‘white’—are deemed normative and superior, and through which white people are granted advantaged status of various kinds.”³ It is “an overarching political, economic, and social system of domination.”⁴ Racial discrimination “is defined as any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect to nullify or to impair the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.”⁵ Being specific with our understandings of racism assists us in addressing its various manifestations in our lives and in our faith communities.

The WCC newsletter headlines read: “In an unprecedented move against the leadership of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the ecumenical movement, WCC associate general secretary Prof. Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri was yesterday apprehended, interrogated and deported from Ben Gurion International Airport.”⁶ No one would have imagined that an official of the

1. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 87.

2. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 21.

3. Jennifer Harvey, Karin A. Case, and Robin Hawley Gorsline, *Disrupting White Supremacy from Within: White People on What We Need to Do* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 4.

4. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 28.

5. Ion Diaconu, “Racial Discrimination: Definition, Approaches and Trends.” Member of the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination. https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiQ-_339Jj4AhVQZTABHTyfAbcQFnoECACQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ohchr.org%2FDocuments%2FIssues%2FRacism%2FIWG%2FSession8%2FIonDiaconu.doc&usg=AOvVaw35wGLqxTIz2F1WeWzm-ltw.

6. WCC News Brief, “WCC: Israeli Action Towards WCC Leadership Unjust, Discriminatory and misinformed,” 24 June 2021, https://www.oikoumene.org/news/wcc-israeli-action-towards-wcc-leadership-unjust-discriminatory-and-misinformed_

WCC would have had such an experience as she was traveling with colleagues to attend consultations with church leaders in Jerusalem to fulfil her duties. The article further stated that “Phiri was the only African member of the WCC staff delegation, the only one denied entry, and that the reason given for her deportation was ‘Prevention of illegal immigration considerations . . .’”⁷ The charges brought against Prof. Dr Phiri were illogical and unjustifiable, just as the courts eventually ruled against the charges. The only logical reason was blatant racism of a subtle or tacit nature.

Lerato,⁸ a young woman from the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, is an international soccer player. She was aggressively recruited by Small Town Community College (STCC), a two-year Christian college in the western region of the United States, to play on the women’s soccer team. Her recruitment occurred mid-year, which is unusual since athletes are usually recruited during the spring academic term for enrolment in the upcoming fall. She was promised a full academic scholarship and other support for her contributions to a potentially winning soccer team at STCC. After her parents made several attempts to vet STCC, they reluctantly agreed to allow their daughter to travel to the college.

Upon her arrival, Lerato faced many racist microaggressions—subtle, insidious forms of racism—on the STCC campus and a nearby small town. Lerato was enrolled in all elective courses, which are less challenging courses usually offered to athletes when coaches want them to focus more on their sport than on receiving a good college education. She should have been enrolled in general education requirements, including science, math, and English courses. While her first language was English, her peers told her she talked funny and mocked her accent. Some teachers constantly asked her to repeat statements, saying they couldn’t understand her English. Her soccer coach did not keep his promises to help her obtain a job to pay for additional expenses like her phone bill and personal hygiene items once she arrived on campus. Also, he told Lerato that the soccer fields in South Africa were inferior to those in the United States. The coach tacitly suggested that Lerato was the sole reason why STCC was having a bad season, that she was athletically incapable of performing as he needed to obtain victories for the women’s soccer team. The coach told Lerato that he no longer needed her to play soccer, and thus she would lose her scholarship and it would be impossible for her to continue her education. This case and the experience of

7. WCC News Brief, “WCC: Israeli Action.”

8. Names of students and educational institutions have been changed.

deputy general secretary Prof. Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri, discussed above, bear witness that racism is a global problem.

Prof. Dr Phiri's experience and Lerato's story illustrate implicit racial insults and stereotypes: microaggressions. Prof. Dr Phiri was judged as unworthy of entering Israel and stereotyped as an African who might violate her visa and remain in the country. Lerato was judged on an abnormal speech pattern, the inferiority of her home country and its sports culture, and stereotypes about the academic and athletic ability of Black Africans. The microaggressions that Prof. Dr Phiri and Lerato experienced are rooted in systematic racism with an ideology that socialized those with white privilege to practise behaviours shaped in the belief that Black Africans are inferior to the norm of being white and Western. The belief that Black life and culture is abnormal and Eurocentric life and culture is normal is perpetuated. As such, all Black Africans are high risks for visa violations. Normal speech does not have an accent. Normal students are neither of African descent nor female. Normal athletes, regardless of race, are not capable of academic achievement; their worth is judged by their athletic prowess. In addition to stereotypes and norms, racial hierarchies are prevalent in North America. "The racial ideology that circulates in the United States rationalizes racial hierarchies as the outcome of a natural order resulting from either genetics or individual effort or talent."⁹ Those who are white and descended from European countries are considered to be genetically superior to all other ethnicities.

Microaggressions and macroaggressions happen to both individuals and groups of racial or ethnic minoritized people. While microaggressions are subtle and implicit acts of racial injustice, macroaggressions are explicit and overt activities of racism. Macroaggressions in the United States include heinous activities such as Jim or Jane Crow laws and poll tax laws as well as horrendous acts of racial violence such as lynching, racial profiling, killings by police, and other forms of execution of racially or ethnically minoritized people.

Microaggressions and macroaggressions are unceasingly perpetrated by people who identify themselves as Christian. They confess belief in Jesus Christ, yet their daily practices are inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus. Christianity and the Christian faith are incompatible with micro-aggressive or macro-aggressive behaviours. Scripture shows that throughout Jesus' ministry,

9. DiAngelo, *White Fragility*, 21.

he was on the side of the oppressed and devoted his life to activities of justice for them. He went about concretizing God's command to be merciful, do justice, and exhibit humility.¹⁰

Why, then, do Christians justify trauma inflicted on people because of the colour of their skin, their culture, or their national origin? This question is not only relevant to why Christians justify the trauma of other human beings; it is also relevant to human rights and human dignity. Human beings, and Christians in particular, justify inflicting trauma on living creatures if they are deemed as not human. African-descended people were not considered human beings by those who enslaved them. They were viewed as animals, brutes, chattel by white people who saw themselves as the superior race. The history of enslavement of African-descended people shows evidence that they were considered as chattel or property of a white owner. It was believed that enslaved Africans had inferior intelligence and did not experience pain. James Marion Sims, the so-called father of modern gynaecology, performed experiments on enslaved African women with vesicovaginal fistulas without anaesthesia to develop instruments to cure this medical problem. "Critics say Sims cared more about experiments than in providing therapeutic treatment, and that he caused untold suffering by operating under the racist notion that black people did not feel pain."¹¹

Such beliefs and practices have continued to perpetuate the suffering of African-descended people at the hands of whites who believe Blacks are not human. Thus, being human not only means African-descended people felt pain but also that they are biologically, physiologically, and psychologically the same as any other human beings, regardless of their race or ethnicity. Being human means having the aforementioned assets, but it also means having theological assets that include a spirit that is enfleshed or incarnated and communes with the Holy Spirit. It also means being created in the image and goodness of God, *imago Dei*. African-descended or Black people are created in the image of God, and God's Spirit dwells within the bodies of Black Christians. The act of desecrating or harming the body of a Black Christian or any person of colour is in fact harming God's vessel. Yet, if the

10. Theron Ford and Blanche Jackson Glimps, *Religion and Racism: Exploring the Paradox—Can You Be a Christian and a Racist?* (New York: Peter Lang, 2020).

11. Brynn Holland, "The 'Father of Modern Gynecology' Performed Shocking Experiments on Enslaved Women," *History Channel*, <https://www.history.com/news/the-father-of-modern-gynecology-performed-shocking-experiments-on-slaves>.

person of colour is not considered human, acts of violence to the black or brown body seem justified.

Racism evident in macro- or microaggressions is incompatible with the Triune God, who created all humankind in the likeness and image of God. In addition, “in Christ Jesus [we] are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of [us] are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26, 28). Our oneness in Christ Jesus makes us equal regardless of any phenotypic, cultural, social, or economic differences.

Likewise, if sin is understood as separation from God or the severing of our relationship with the divine creator and sustainer of the world, then the vicious activities that racist human beings perpetrate against other human beings is sin. God despises the sin of racism and racist perpetrators. Why do white Christians tolerate, at best, or remain silent when their governmental and religious leaders develop and implement death-dealing policies that harm, hinder, or destroy other people? If Black and Brown people are not considered human or are considered as unequal to white or European people, the silence of white Christians gives consent to governmental and religious leaders who create policy and commit racist acts.

Ultimately, we must ask: How does the church take authority to maintain the human dignity and human rights of all persons in the human family in a world governed by racism and white supremacy? First, white Christians must become aware that racism is a sin and recognize their role in perpetuating racism. Awareness includes becoming conscious about their acts of micro- and macro-aggressive behaviour in policies on local and governmental levels and ending the silence of white Christians that perpetuates racism. Awareness is an educational process that transforms ways of thinking and ways of doing things simultaneously. The process of becoming aware of one’s racism includes intellectual, emotional, and spiritual transformation. Pressures from the dominant culture, peers, and family make the process laborious, as does white fragility, which perpetuates racism. By fragility I mean reluctance to accept culpability. Yet, the very activity of becoming aware of one’s racism and complicity with white supremacy is the first step.

Second, as white Christians become aware of their role in perpetuating racism, they must confess their sin through prayer and worship. The Holy Spirit transforms a sincere and contrite heart, and prayer and worship provide a context for the Holy Spirit to act. Prayer and worship may be both

formal and informal; that is, they can take place in public spaces such as congregations, as well as in private spaces. Becoming aware of one's complicity with racism and white supremacy must include accompanying activities of prayer and worship that allow acts of confession, petitions for forgiveness, and transformation from activities of racism.

Third, white Christians should obtain new understandings and practices of love. The love I speak of is unconditional acceptance of all human beings received as God's gracious gift of body and Spirit. Just as the Triune God created us and those whom we love, God also created all human beings for us to love unconditionally. Love does not "rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth" (1 Cor. 13:6b). Thus, activities of violence in the form of microaggressions or macroaggressions are wrongdoings that are contrary to God's command for unconditional love.

Unconditional love, which is the Christian mandate, is not tolerance, which is found throughout the Durban Declaration and Plan of Action (DDPA), the international document that addresses racism. The DDPA speaks extensively about intolerance and the need to tolerate various groups. A quote from "General Issues" illustrates my point.

6. We further affirm that all peoples and individuals constitute one human family, rich in diversity. They have contributed to the progress of civilization and cultures that form the common heritage of humanity. Preservation and promotion of tolerance, pluralism and respect for diversity can produce more inclusive societies.¹²

Christians must act beyond tolerance to love all members of the human family so that they may flourish. This means, as the DDPA suggests, the imperative of designing, promoting, and implementing strategies to eliminate racism at national, regional, and international levels.¹³ Education about the legacy of racism as well as structuring programs, policies, and legislation is Christian love in action.

The main challenge to Christian churches is the global pandemic of racism. The Church takes authority to maintain the human dignity and human rights of all persons in the human family amid global racism through

12. United Nations, *World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance: Declaration and Programme of Action* (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 2002), 5. https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/Durban_text_en.pdf.

13. United Nations, *World Conference Against Racism*, para. 107, 18.

awareness of the sin of racism, confession of their role in perpetuating racism, and unconditional love that yields policies, programs, and legislations to eliminate racism. Racism as sin, confession of the sin of racism and Christian love are the foundational theological components for eradicating racism for the thriving of the human family around the globe.