

Overcoming Racism: The Role of Religion and Faith Communities

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A period of profound racial reckoning has stirred the conscience of our nation and presented an historic opportunity for meaningful change, one in which individuals and communities of faith have unique responsibilities. Religion has historically shown great capacity both to unite disparate peoples in a shared sense of identity and purpose but also to divide them against one another with disastrous consequences. Over the past five years, a diverse group of people from different organizations, faith traditions, and racial backgrounds has been reflecting—through a sustained dialogue on faith and race—on how religion can live up to its potential as a force of constructive change. We feel compelled to share some insights and commitments from our conversations, and invite you to consider their implications for thought and practice within and beyond faith communities.

Religion, when true to its highest spiritual ideals, has the capacity to unite diverse people with a sense of shared moral purpose, binding them together in common cause. **People of all faiths thus have a spiritual obligation to construct a unified society** in which every individual and social group has the opportunity to develop their latent potentialities, and thereby contribute to the well-being of all. In this regard, racism constitutes a profound deviation from true morality and the inherent interconnectedness of the human family. It is a blight on humanity. How can we contribute to a shared commitment across faith communities to demonstrate our faith in action as a unifying force in society?

To overcome racism **change is needed at multiple levels**. Ultimately, lasting social and economic **progress requires moral and spiritual transformation**. Further, **individuals, communities, and institutions all possess both agency and room for advancement** in this struggle. These social actors, and the relationships among them, all must evolve to reflect trust, mutual support, and cooperation. Change must come to hearts and minds; norms and relations in communities; and to the structures and practices of our institutions. These changes are mutually dependent and reinforcing. If individuals, communities and institutions all have agency and room for advancement, what additional capacities do each need to develop in order to promote racial justice?

The national conversation on race has been characterized by a high degree of mistrust, polarization, and division. Social justice can be advanced in unifying and constructive ways that not only accommodate, but value, diversity. Indeed, **justice requires universal participation** in both creating and benefiting from shared prosperity. Society can be conceived as an interdependent social body in which every individual and group derives its well-being from the well-being of the whole.

If we accept this then we can recognize that **no individual or group is truly free unless all individuals and groups are free.** How can we embrace wider circles of care where every individual and group realizes their latent potential to contribute to the well-being of the entire social body? What implications does this wider embrace have when we seek to address racism and its impact on our economic life, on social cohesion, on the well-being of families, and so on?

Power, when understood as a scarce resource and a means of domination and division, is used to perpetuate racism and other forms of oppression. Such power is hoarded, jealously defended, and susceptible to the corrupting influence of vested interests. **Religion raises our awareness of other forms of power—moral or spiritual powers— which give us the capacity to transform our social worlds.** These powers of the human spirit are limitless and accessible to all. They include the power of unified action, the power of love, the power of justice, the power of truth, the power of pure deeds and sacrificial service, and the power of divine assistance and confirmation. Awareness of these powers opens transformative possibilities. We have the capacity to build new social realities that can supplant the current social order with its competitive and conflictual uses of power. How does this sense of abundance in thinking about power help us overcome the notions of scarcity that perpetuate racial, economic, and environmental injustice?

Race and racism are social constructions that grow partly out of the stories we tell about who we are and where we are going. Currently in the U.S. we have divergent narratives. Some obscure the role of race and racism in the current social order. Others depict race relations as an inescapable power struggle. **Faith-based voices have a responsibility to contribute to the emergence of a shared, inclusive, realistic, yet aspirational understanding of the American story**—a story that gives meaning to our past and present, orients us to a possible future of shared prosperity, and inspires us to assume our moral responsibilities in the wider community of nations. How can we begin to develop language, concepts, and vision for a better world—rather than simply a description of the world as it is? How can this emerge from an awareness of our common humanity, and our inherent dignity and nobility, rather than our current conditions of oppression?

The insights and commitments articulated above constitute an earnest and urgent invitation to explore the role that religion must play in overcoming racism in our society. Participants in the dialogue on faith and race hope to learn, alongside all like-minded people, how to translate these insights and commitments into meaningful, effective, transformative conversation and action. Toward this end, you are invited to study this statement with others, reflect on its implications, and join us on this path of learning in action.