

Christian Privilege & Religious Bigotry

White Privilege: Unpacking The Invisible Knapsack

- Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley (1988)
 - White female scholar researching oppression of women
 - What about the flip side of oppression?
 - How do I *benefit* from being white?
 - *I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.*
 - *I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.*
 - *I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.*
 - *When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.*

What is privilege?

- Privilege is an unearned benefit from a system of oppression, dominance, or hierarchy.
 - The privileged often benefit unintentionally.
 - The privileged are often unaware of their benefits.

Types of Privilege in the US

- Privilege Bingo

B	I	N	G	O
white	mentally healthy	cisgender	able-bodied	male
tall	socially connected	standard accent	attractive	English 1st language
heterosexual	wealthy	human	had two parents	employed
born in US	married	literate	thin	photo ID
Christian	major political party member	adult	no criminal record	educated

Privilege is not...

- An easy life.
- Deserving nothing.
- Always having an advantage.
- Being a bad person.
- Hating others.
- Trying to take advantage of the system.

Why are we unaware of privilege?

- Exercise: Think of a specific situation in which you
 - were unjustly harmed, marginalized, or disadvantaged.
 - benefited from a system that harmed, marginalized, or disadvantaged others.
- We tend to notice more when we are victims than when we are beneficiaries.
- Compare:
 - Someone gives you a dollar
 - Someone steals a dollar from you.

Why are we unaware of privilege?

- Frog to fish: “How’s the water?”
 - Systemic
- Psychology - Piff fairness study (UC Irvine)
 - A Rigged Monopoly Game
 - Flip a coin to determine advantage.
 - “Winner” starts with double the usual money, three dice.
 - “Loser” starts with half the money, one die.
 - Results:
 - Winner: I played better; examples of strategy.
 - Losers: I played worse. Few: the rules weren’t fair.

Christian Privilege in US

- Christian privilege is an unearned benefit from systems that favor Christians and expression of Christian beliefs and practices over others.
- Christianity is the most popular religion in the US (~70% of US Americans are Christians).
- No other religion has more than 2% of the population.
- “Nones” are around 25%.
- Louis CK

Spheres of Christian Privilege

Paul Kivel

- Interpersonal
 - Discrimination, hate crimes, marginalization of non-Christians.
- Institutional
 - CP in health care, legal, criminal, political, economic institutions.
- Structural
 - How institutions interact perpetuating Christian dominance.
- Cultural
 - How Christians and their beliefs and values are portrayed.
- Internal
 - Internalization of Christian concepts, thoughts, desires, feelings.

Christian Privilege in Government

- Nearly every US president has been Christian.
- Christians are over-represented in US Congress.
 - Around 90% of Congress members are Christian compared with 70% of US Americans. (115th Congress)
 - <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/01/03/faith-on-the-hill-115/>
- Nones are massively under-represented in Congress
 - Only 0.2% of Congress members are nones compared with 23 percent of Americans. (115th Congress)
- SCOTUS: 6 Christian, 3 Jewish
 - Historically: 104/114 were Christian. One “none”: David Davis?
- Atheist can't hold office in AR, MD, MS, NC, SC, TN, TX. (+PA?)
- USAG Bill Barr's speech to Notre Dame Law School

Christian Privilege in Education

- If you're a Christian, ...
- Your children, even when enrolled in public schools, are more likely than not to have teachers who share your faith.
- Your teacher is unlikely to put you on the spot to explain or defend your religious beliefs, dress, or practices.
- You can easily find a network of Christian schools to educate your children, from pre-school through college.
- Your children will feel comfortable saying the Pledge of Allegiance especially since the addition of "under God" in 1952.

Most of the Christian privilege examples in this lecture are quoted from Kivel or Schlosser.

Christian Privilege at Work

- If you're a Christian,...
- You probably have off work your preferred day of worship
- You probably have time off for your religious holidays
- You never have to explain why you want those days off

Christian Privilege in Worship

- If you are a Christian, ...
- You can build a place of worship or meeting hall without enduring community outrage or pseudo-zoning issues.
- You can worship freely without threats or violence--unless you attend a Black Christian church.
- Fundraising to support your church will not be misconstrued, and possibly investigated, as a potentially threatening contribution to “terrorist” coffers.
- Your faith isn’t regularly reduced to the most violent passages of your Holy Book.

Christian Privilege in Law

- If you are a Christian, ...
- When "swearing an oath," you are asked to place your hand on *your* faith's religious book.
- In court, you are asked to swear to tell the truth ... "so help me God."
- When tried in court, you can assume that a jury of "your peers" will share your religious views and not hold your beliefs (or lack thereof) against you in weighing decisions.
- In divorce proceedings, the judge won't count your religion against you in custody disputes.
- When disclosing your faith to an adoption agency, that disclosure alone will not decrease your chances of adopting children.

Christian Privilege in Pop Culture

- If you are a Christian, ...
- You can easily find/purchase your holiday or religious-themed food, decorations, books, music, movies, etc.
- You can openly display these without fear of harm, vandalism, etc.
- You can expect people will meet you with greetings appropriate to your holidays, and you probably assume you can greet others likewise.
- You aren't pressured to celebrate holidays of other religions.
- You aren't penalized or looked down on for ignorance about other religious practices, beliefs, holidays, etc.
- You can easily find in pop culture positive references to your faith, rituals, beliefs, deities.

Christian Privilege in Stereotyping

- If you are Christian, ...
- You can be kind, peaceful, or generous and not be considered an “exception” to your faith or those of you without faith.
- You are not lumped in with the worst elements/members of your religion.
- You will not be blamed, threatened, or killed if someone of your religion commit acts of mass violence.
- You can dismiss Christian privilege in this assumed “Christian nation” and smear those working for equality as “activists who are waging war on Christianity.”

Christian Privilege in Public Policy

- Oppression of
 - Indigenous peoples
 - African-Americans
 - Women
 - Other Christians (e.g., Catholics)
 - Jewish people
 - Sexual minorities
 - Muslims
 - The Non-Religious

Christian Privilege in Our Community

- Prayer before public meetings
- Christian songs at public building dedications
- Inconsistent application of standards for “protected status”
 - Housing and sexual minorities
 - Claim 1: Protected status reverses burden of proof.
 - False
 - Claim 2: Sexual minority is “fluid” and “solely self-identified membership.”
 - Like *being a Christian*?

Personal Stories of Christian Privilege or Dominance

- Volunteers: read or share a personal story

Yeah, but ...

- Aren't these examples pretty trivial?
 - Some are; some aren't. Genocide, oppression of sexual minorities, anti-Muslim war rhetoric.
- Isn't the US a secular country?
 - Officially, yes, but Christian language, symbolism, policies pervade.
- Don't all religions do this?
 - They all can with enough power, but in the US, Christianity has the power.
- Aren't Christians also oppressed?
 - There are pockets in which Christians don't dominate, but that isn't systemic oppression. To the privileged, movements toward equality feel like oppression.
 - The feeling is real and understandable; that doesn't make it true.
- Isn't it right-wing Christians that are the problem?
 - Perhaps, but they influence others, and all Christians have a responsibility to counter privilege.

Eliminating Christian Privilege

- A dilemma
 - The privileged are most empowered and responsible to eliminate privilege but lack awareness & motivation.
 - The unprivileged are most aware and motivated to eliminate privilege but lack power and aren't primarily responsible.
- What can non-Christians do?
- Help Christians understand and reduce their privilege.

How Christians Can Help Eliminate their Privilege

Paul Kivel, *Living in the Shadow of the Cross*:

- Learn the history of Christianity [and your denomination], [and] its impact on other peoples...
- Examine how you may have internalized judgments about yourself based on Christian teachings. [E.g., regarding sexuality, spirituality, the natural world]
- Examine how you have internalized feelings of superiority or negative judgment of others, especially those from marginalized or non-Christian groups.
- Understand and acknowledge the benefits you gain from being Christian in the US.
- Use your privilege to support the struggles of non-Christian peoples throughout the world for land, autonomy, reparations, and justice.
- Organize to change organizational and institutional policies that perpetuate Christian hegemony.
- Respect other peoples' sacred places, rituals, sacred objects and culture; don't assume you can appropriate them.
- Work for religious pluralism, and support the separation of church and state.

How Christians Can Help Eliminate their Privilege (2)

- Analyze public policy through the lens of Christian hegemony.
- Avoid assuming other people you meet are Christian...
- —or should be, and challenge missionary programs.
- Understand and respect non-Christian religions and cultures on their own terms. Avoid universalizing about religions, or assuming all religions are essentially the same, worship the same god under different names or are comparable to Christianity.
- Avoid excusing hurtful behavior or policies because of the good intent of their perpetrators. Work with others to respectfully hold people accountable for their behavior.
- Embrace diversity and complexity....
- [P]ractice discussing these topics with other Christians in private conversations, when there are public exhibitions of Christianity and in organizational meetings.

Resources on Christian Privilege

- Paul Kivel. *Living in the Shadow of the Cross: Understanding and Resisting the Power and Privilege of Christian Hegemony*. 2013
- Peggy McIntosh. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988)
 - Excerpt: "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack"
- Lewis Z. Schlosser. "Christian Privilege: Breaking a Sacred Taboo." *Multicultural Counseling and Development* v.1, Jan., 2003. (pp. 48-49)

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