

Deconstructing White Supremacy Culture Imbedded within Christianity

Black History Month invites the Church to make space to reflect upon our history of engagement with the Black community. As we explored previously in the article [“Atoning for Christianity’s History with Our Black Siblings,”](#) our history with the Black community has been one of oppression as Christianity has frequently contributed to the suffering and marginalization of our Black siblings. It is time for Christianity, represented by the Church’s leaders and members, to repent of our oppressive ways. True repentance comes not in just acknowledging how we have hurt our Black siblings, but also doing the deeper work of confronting what lies in our core that led us to oppress and marginalize in the first place so we build a better future. We must confront the white supremacy culture that is imbedded within Christianity and lived out in and through the Church.

White Supremacy and White Supremacy Culture

In [“White Supremacy Culture – Still Here”](#) (2021), author and social justice worker Dr. Tema Okun lays a foundation for understanding and transforming white supremacy and white supremacy culture. While we may think of Nazi’s and the KKK when referring to white supremacy, Dr. Okun offers a broader understanding,

“[W]hite supremacy refers to the ways in which the ruling class elite or the power elite in the colonies of what was to become the United States used the pseudo-scientific concept of race to create whiteness and a hierarchy of racialized value in order to disconnect and divide: white people from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)...Black, Indigenous, and People of Color from each other...white people from other white people...each of us from ourselves and from source...The power elite constructed white supremacy (and constructs it still) to define who is fully human and who is not...in the name of power and profit,” (Okun, 2021).

Okun’s description of white supremacy may sound familiar because it aligns with a popular way of describing sin in the Christian tradition. Sin is often defined as the state of being in broken relationship with others, God, and ourselves; based on Jesus’s description of the “greatest commandment” found in Matthew 22:37-39, Mark 12:30-31, and Luke 10:27. White supremacy is a sinful power structure.

So, what exactly then is “white supremacy culture?” According to Dr. Okun, it is the “widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not all of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, **teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value,**” (Okun, 2021; emphasis by Okun). White supremacy culture invites everyone regardless of race or social standing to cooperate, collude, and assimilate to the value of whiteness and serve the power elite. Christians are no exception as the “powerful elite constructed (and continues to construct) white supremacy to interest with...support, reinforce and reproduce capitalism, class oppression, gender oppression, heterosexism, ableism, **Christian hegemony**...These in turn function to support, reinforce, and reproduce white supremacy.” (Okun, 2021; emphasis mine). Dr. Okun reaffirms Christianity’s gives several examples in her article how white supremacy culture is imbedded in Christianity.

Christianity Has A History of Aligning with the Power Elite

Dr. Okun's assertions that Christianity has existed alongside the power elite in supporting, reinforcing and reproducing white supremacy may be alarming for us. The truth is Christianity has a long history of placing itself alongside the cultural elite to the detriment of the rest of God's children in different ways. John Philip Newell in his book, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* (2021), argues that Christianity became "the religion of empire in the fourth century," and "in return for political protection and prestige," Mediterranean Christianity produced *creation ex nihilo*. According to Newell, this doctrine "gave the empire a type of permission to do whatever it wished with material things [including human bodies]. It set the stage for how Christianity was to be used by empires again and again over the centuries—to sanction their exploitation," (p. 26, Kindle edition). Christianity's allegiance with the power elite and empire has continued throughout history as Newell pointed out throughout his book. The impact on the Black community in the United States by Christianity's and white supremacy's allegiance has been explained by scholars and Christian leaders such as Ibram X. Kendi in his book, *Stamped from the Beginning* (2017), Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in many of his speeches and writings, and Rev. Howard Thurman in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (2012). Details were explored in the previous article.

Christianity and Fear

Today, Christianity continues to align itself with the power elite and against our Black siblings. We do so by consciously and unconsciously embodying the oppressive and divisive characteristics of white supremacy culture. The greatest characteristic of white supremacy culture is fear and the use of fear to disconnect and manipulate, according to Dr. Okun. Why fear? Because "when we are afraid...we are easily manipulated by any false yet powerful sense of safety...White supremacy culture cultivates our fear of not belonging, of not being enough," teaching us overtly or covertly to fear others so we can prove ourselves ok. (Okun, 2021) Fear is the foundation of all white supremacy culture characteristics.

Fear has been used by the church to say that no one is good enough (total depravity) and yet perpetuating an us/them existence (faith v. fear, spiritual realm v. earthly world, believers v. heathens, church goers v. non-church goers, blessed v. cursed...) Fear of not being good enough has been used by Christianity in the promotion of caste systems, protestant work ethic, prosperity gospel, Christian nationalism, resource hoarding, Christian persecution, the removal of God from secular life, and so many more philosophies/theologies that distort our understanding of our relationship with God but make us feel like we are ok because we live up to whatever distorted expectations we argue God has for us. These expectations allow us to stay focused on our own well-being while judging or flat-out ignoring the oppression and suffering of others, particularly our Black siblings, as the problem isn't us or anyone else living rightly. The problem rather gets defined as those suffering are not living by the fear-based expectations created by Christian leaders—insinuating they deserve what they get.

Christianity, "One Right Way," and Paternalism

"One right way" orientation and paternalism are white supremacy culture characteristics that go hand-in-hand according to Dr. Okun. One right way orientation reveals itself as "the belief there is one right way to do things and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it." This belief is reinforced by paternalism, which is expressed as "those holding power assume they are qualified to (and entitled to) define standards and the one right way as well as make decisions for and in the interests of those without power." (Okun, 2021) One right way mentality and paternalism has led Christianity (particularly white Christianity) to refrain from social justice work, but focus on Sunday

mornings where we feel qualified to still critique how we wish the fight for social justice was being carried out more civilly. Or, white Christianity decides which social issues the Church should or should not get engaged in, commonly focusing on one issue (i.e. abortion) while staying away from working for change to social systems that oppress the Black Community, or outright denying the systems exist. This is made easier by white Christianity making Jesus and God in its own image to reinforce its authority.

Christianity, Quantity Over Quality, and Right to Comfort

There are many more characteristics listed by Dr. Okun, but two more that are prevalent in Christian culture are “quantity over quality” and “right to comfort.” Functioning with a “quantity over quality” mentality is when “things that can be counted are more highly valued than things that cannot,” such as when the budget guides decision making or goals are set for attendance and participation for worship or other programs rather than focusing on the relationships being built or the enhancement of spiritual life. Christianity’s focus on quantity (and shrinking quantity in the last few decades) has led to doubling down on “the right to comfort” defined by Dr. Okun as “our cultural assumption that I or we (the ones in formal and informal power) have a right to comfort, which means we cannot tolerate conflict” and leads to the “tendency to blame the person or group causing discomfort or conflict rather than addressing the issues being named.”

As Christianity’s resources and participants have declined, churches and their leaders have turned to doing what is necessary to keep those still engaged comfortable so they won’t leave as well. This has been done at times by setting a vision that it is possible to go back to the “good ol’ days” when the church was full but there was greater overt oppression and discrimination against the Black community. Other times, Church leaders adjust their messages and the vision of the church to be less challenging and more comfortable to their members, which means social justice issues are ignored for the discomfort they bring, or they are merely alluded to without any expectation of engagement. Many times, those working for social justice and the rights of the Black community are blamed (much like Martin Luther King Jr.) for causing conflict because the goal should be for all of us to just get along.

Christianity’s Hope for the Future

Despite Christianity’s embodiment of white supremacy, there is hope for a future that evolves from our past and present. Dr. Okun asserts that “the good news is that while white supremacy culture informs us, it does not define us. It is a construct, and **anything constructed can be deconstructed and replaced.**”

So where do we start? We start by examining how white supremacy culture has conditioned each one of us and the systems within Christianity, as awareness of our conditioning “is necessary if we are going to change and grow.” (Okun, 2021; emphasis by Dr. Okun) Our awareness is imperative because as activist and writer Audre Lord proclaimed in her speech at the New York University Institute for the Humanities conference in 1984, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house...they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those...who still define the master’s house as their only source of support.”

White supremacy is not Christianity’s only source of support, there is a much better way that we have been shown by Jesus, but we cannot let our ingrained sense of urgency (another characteristic of white supremacy culture) move us straight to impromptu action. We must first familiarize ourselves with the characteristics of white supremacy culture so we can recognize them being lived out in our Christian

lives, place them at the feet of Jesus and our Black siblings, and envision holier ways of existing and engaging the Black community. The master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house, so we must learn to put them down and instead pick-up the tools of Jesus. This work is not easy or quick, but it is pivotal if we are to build a future of love and unity with Jesus and our Black siblings. So let us begin the deep deconstruction of white supremacy culture so we can realize a future of holy relationship with God, our neighbors of all colors, and ourselves.

Your sibling in this journey,

Rev. Zac Wolfe