



White Complicity as a Way Toward Racial Solidarity

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White people of faith frequently raise the question of individual guilt in discussions of white privilege, power, and racism. Most often the issue of guilt arises through white assertions of racial innocence. This essay draws contrast between the framework of individual culpability and that of social complicity as a way toward solidarity.

Certainly, guilt is very tricky. While honest people may utilize guilt as the “prick of conscience” that leads to confession, guilt may not be the best way to inspire conversion. People are not prone to accept public blame or ridicule. Guilt tends to focus on needs of the individual to achieve personal righteousness, but does not necessarily invite relationships with persons victimized by racial injustice.

Too often, as a society, “racism” is often reduced to individual acts of intentional racism. We commonly

associate racism with such historical figures as Bull Connor, the racist police chief of Birmingham, Alabama, who unleashed violent dogs on civil rights protestors. Good white people rightfully abhor this form of overt white supremacy.

The framework of individual culpability is partially helpful for moral clarity and identifying individual perpetrators. As a society, we want and ought to hold individuals responsible. Establishing individual culpability is also critical legally to hold individuals and institutions accountable for legal violations.

The Civil Rights legislation of the mid-1960s established legal parameters for free, individual access to integrated institutions and the responsibility of government to establish non-discriminatory practices in private business, employment, and housing, among other areas.

On its own, however, individual culpability is problematic. The individual framework fails to contend with deeper historical, cultural, and structural dimensions of racial oppression and inequality. It fails to account for the enduring dominance of white cultural norms and practices in society.

For starters, the individual frame fails to address how implicit cognitive bias operates. Implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that influence our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. Implicit bias is not accessible through individual introspection. Individuals may claim to support diversity and racial equality yet act in ways that contradict those values.

So, for example, in her study of hiring outcomes in three U.S. cities, the sociologist Devah Pager found that employers affirmed their support for racial equality. Yet the study found that white applicants with a criminal record were just as likely to receive a callback as a black applicant without any criminal record. Despite the fact that white applicants revealed evidence of felony drug conviction and reported having returned from one-and-a-half years in prison, employers viewed them as no more risky than a young black male *with no criminal record*.¹ Research continues to demonstrate how implicit racial bias influences decisions that have life and death consequences.²

Second, the individual frame fails to account for the way reality is socially constructed. An individualist approach cannot account for the multiple ways individuals both shape and are shaped by society.

Third, reality is far more complex than a simple duality between guilt and innocence. The continuum between willing and unwilling perpetrators, willing and unwilling accomplices, and willing and unwilling bystanders is complex and vast.

Everyday practices of ordinary, good white people contribute to the maintenance of institutions and structures that systemically benefit white Americans to the detriment of communities of color. The

frame of white complicity, alternatively, offers a different and more dynamic way to explore how good people contribute to injustice.

Indeed, in *The Scandal of White Complicity in U.S. Hyper-incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* Margaret Pfeil, Laurie Cassidy, and I consciously chose complicity as a way to explore how white power operates. We reflect on our shared white social, moral, and spiritual complicity in the historical, structural, and cultural roots of contemporary U.S. racial inequality, especially as it is manifested in the hyper-incarceration of African-Americans and Latinos. So, briefly, why focus on complicity?

First, in contrast to American individualism, complicity is a way of proceeding that helps people perceive the myriad ways we are entangled within interdependent networks of human interaction. It invites a sense of humility and wonder before all other people.

Complicity recognizes that all people, and especially white Americans, need to learn from many others who are too often forgotten by history. Complicity suggests that we need to learn from slaves and their descendents, who teach us about their humanity in the midst of oppression. Whites tend to forget also how African slaves, to cite only one example, resisted racial oppression and demanded fundamental changes to practices of religious faith and democracy.

Second, whites tend to utilize a language of innocence that renders white privilege and power invisible to conscious critique. The language of innocence and guilt is deeply color-coded into the binary imagery of white innocence and black criminality in U.S. history. *The Scandal of White Complicity* explores how the rhetoric of white innocence is a “trigger that brings up the stereotype of criminal, promiscuous, lazy black people.” The problem is that invoking innocence “draws power from the implicit contrast of black defilement.”³ In other words, the assertion of white innocence actually implicates whites in the cultural reproduction of racial inequality.

At a deeper level, complicity concerns spirituality, how we love God and neighbor. The opening paragraph of Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (*Gaudium et Spes*) best orients the Church and people of faith:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well.

This paragraph concludes: “This is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.”⁴

Vatican II invites our shared reflection: How do white people of faith listen and attend to the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of people of all colors? At issue is our daily spiritual practice and how we live (or not) the Gospel call to solidarity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Devah Pager, *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007), 89-91.
- 2 “State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2013,” available online at <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/research-2/understanding-implicit-bias/>
- 3 Alex Mikulich, Laurie Cassidy, and Margaret Pfeil, *The Scandal of White Complicity in U.S. Hyper-incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 11.
- 4 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* in Austin Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, New York: Costello Publishing, 1987), p. 903-904.