

9-18-2014

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, D. (2014). On Being White and Teaching Race, Religion and Theology. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/phil_facpub/10

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On Being White and Teaching Race, Religion and Theology

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Silence, guilt and fear are obstacles to justice and democracy. My white brothers and sisters, we have often let the fear of breaking the rules of certain types of discourse trap us. Too often we let fear immobilize us and we remain silent. Let's take for example the fear of talking and teaching about race as a white person. We believe the discourse of whiteness that says racism



and the struggle for racial justice are not white problems and/or that whites are supposed to be color-blind. We follow the rules that say we can't talk about race because to do so would be to admit that racism is a white problem and that we see color. We scare ourselves into thinking that we are not a people with a race and that our histories and legacies do not matter in the struggle for racial justice.

Part of the silence of talking about race in our classrooms is the fear of being called a racist and/or white guilt. Unfortunately you will say or do something in class that can be perceived as racist or may be racist. Hopefully these are situations that allow for dialog and become teachable moments. The only way to deal with this kind of fear is to address it head on. We cannot allow ourselves to be trapped in white guilt. White guilt often grows from the self-realization that your entire childhood culture was founded upon the superiority of whites. The guilt can be profound, but can be used as a catalyst for working toward change.

It took me quite some time to realize that teaching is a political act. There is no way around it. It is political because education is not value free. To not teach about race in our religion and theology classes is to default to the status quo. Many of our institutions do not discuss the

history of the academy or how our disciplines came into being. Many of us have been trained



and taught to believe categories like religion, theology, and biblical studies are generally apolitical, race-free and gender-neutral. Very little discussion takes place about the system of white Christian and colonial domination that are the foundation of our academic disciplines. It is not until you stand back with a critical eye that you realize, for example, that *theology* really means *white male theology* if all the other theologies are preceded by descriptors like: *Black, liberation, Feminist, Womanist, Latino/a*, etc. Politics are at the core of our disciplines. To remain silent is to allow the systems to continue.

Here are some tools to help whites step up and speak out in the classroom:

- Become more self-aware of the power and privileges you maintain as a member of the white-ruled community and society. Attend anti-racism and anti-oppression seminars, workshops and trainings. Learn your own family's history. First, you will have a context for the roots of racism and other types of oppression in your own family. Knowing about the racism in your family will help you deal with it in your own life. Second, you will learn about the social change models in your history.
- Learn how to listen. Whites often become paternalistic, ignoring the needs and wishes of non-white people. The point is solidarity. What your students have to say is important.
- Claim boldly the role of religious, theological and biblical studies in shaping cultural ethics and morals. Students attend our classes to help them answer the big questions of life. For some, those questions include: How do I participate in the oppression of others? How do I make a difference in the world? We have an obligation to assist them form opinions and to think about ethical issues.
- Be vulnerable and honest in your classes and with your students. This is hard but important stuff. You cannot know it all and it is okay for the students to know it. It is good for students to see models of co-learning, honesty and attempts to be genuine.
- De-mystify and expose the discourse of white supremacy and name the white privileges it gives to individuals, including yourself. There is a lot of confusion about the terms *white supremacy* and *white privilege*. White supremacy is a system of oppression that suppresses non-whites in order to give advantage to whites. White privilege is a set of social benefits and advantage given to whites due to the system of white supremacy.

Talking about race and racism in our religion and theology classrooms is complex and multi-faceted. It means making a commitment to changing the cultures of violence we see around us. It means taking risks. However, the rewards give aid to a more just society.