



IS WHITE PRIVILEGE THE REAL PROBLEM?

The NTCOF service today considers the problem of racism. This was presaged by the April bulletin of this year which was taken up with an article entitled "Racism as Nonsensical as Creationism." Racism, of course, is a far more intractable and damaging problem than Creationism, so in some sense they cannot be compared. But they are both based on false beliefs and fraudulent claims. And with both, everyone thinks they know what they are even though their promoters don't agree about what they are. Of course, the religious-theological character of Creationism seems clear, while that of racism is not appreciated. Nor do the traditional religions seem to take as much interest in racism, perhaps for that reason. But even if racism had nothing at all to do with religion-theology, as a serious social problem it ought to receive much more attention from churches than it does.

With slavery abolished, with segregation ended, and with continuing efforts to root out formal discrimination in the law and institutional practices, great progress has been made against racism. As this has happened attention has been turned to more subtle disparities. One, bringing to mind the old cliché about the glass half-empty or half-full, is considering racism as a problem of "white privilege." This has been expressed in different ways but the idea is that "white people" benefit from social conventions and practices and ways of thinking connected with them and that it is these that are burdensome and oppressive. This is said to apply whether or not the "white people" in question are aware of it. In fact, their being unaware is yet another way that they benefit from "white privilege." That is, part of "white privilege" is being able to ignore how it harms "not-white" people. "White privilege" includes being oblivious to the experiences of "not-white" people.

Social scientist Laura Pulido put it this way:

"White privilege is a form of racism that both underlies and is distinct from institutional and overt racism. It underlies them in that both are predicated on preserving the privileges of white people (regardless of whether agents recognize this or not). But it is also distinct in terms of intentionality. It refers to the hegemonic structures, practices, and ideologies that reproduce

whites' privileged status. In this scenario, whites do not necessarily intend to hurt people of color, but because they are unaware of their white-skin privilege, and because they accrue social and economic benefits by maintaining the status quo, they inevitably do." [Pulido, L, "Rethinking Environmental Racism: White Privilege and Urban Development in Southern California", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90: 15, 2000]

Many other details have been added to this picture. Some have argued that the "privilege" in question has more to do with wealth and social status as, indeed, many "white people" are no better off and in some cases worse off than some "people of color." The word "privilege" may also be inapt because often what is meant are rights to which all should be entitled. Where such rights are denied then remedies should be applied. But in other situations what is involved may be individual preferences having nothing to do with "racism" in the sense of prejudice towards or hatred of others.

That job applicants with names that "sound black" get fewer requests for interviews than those that "sound white" is seriously disturbing, for example. But how much concern should there be that blacks are more than twice as likely as whites to marry someone who is not of their same "race" and that black men are more than twice as likely as black women to do so? Asians are even more likely to marry outside their "race," and Asian women are more than twice as likely to do so than Asian men.

Should some ominous conclusion be drawn from such facts? More darkly, what should be made of Jewish people having higher average incomes than non-Jews, being more likely to be college-educated or professionals and to occupy positions of power out of proportion to their numbers in the population? Do such things prove "Jewish privilege?"

"White privilege" has also come under criticism for the same reason that some of Freud's ideas about the unconscious have been questioned. For if someone undergoes psychoanalysis and agrees that various unconscious processes are at work, it is taken as proof of the psychoanalytic theories. But a patient's protestations are also considered as validation on the grounds that this is evidence of an uncon-

scious resistance to accepting the truth. The idea of "white privilege" has the same flaw. Since nothing can really falsify it, its explanatory power is illusory and may actually divert attention from better ways of understanding.

Some examples of "white privilege" that have been offered are simply silly because of demographic realities. Since blacks make up 13% of the US population, for example, it is far more likely that they will encounter non-blacks – and whites – in their everyday lives, other things being equal, than whites will encounter non-whites – or blacks. An American visiting or living in Japan will likewise encounter mostly Japanese in those circumstances. We can conceptualize that as "Japanese privilege" but it's not what most people mean when they think about or talk about "racism."

The legacy of slavery and discrimination and especially the idea of "race" used to justify them does show how powerful perceptions can be. It is likely that very few people born and raised to be slaves in the American South thought to question the idea that they were actually inferior. It was prohibited even for them to be taught to read, and many must have thought it a kind of magic to be able to do so. After the Civil War, the fact of segregation, too, reinforced a cultural dogma that "whites" and "coloreds" were deeply and unalterably unequal and this was probably genuinely felt by the vast majority of people of all skin shades. So what, now, must be the perception of "not-whites" for this new notion of "white privilege?" Whatever it is, they cannot experience it themselves. It may seem another insurmountable barrier, one that can account for every affront, every broken dream and every dashed hope they may experience.

So is "white privilege" real? Is it the real problem? It seems it is an idea that is somewhat "in the eye of the beholder." It may be useful but it would seem to have its hazards as well. It is, more than anything, perhaps, another sign of the need for people to reject the false and fraudulent idea that humans come in different "races" and that our most obvious physical feature – skin color – must also be the most important one. If that idea can ever pass into oblivion, we can be confident that people will construct other ways of including some in an ingroup and all others in an outgroup, of distinguishing "us" from "them." But aside from religious creeds, there is probably no more pernicious way of doing this than by the biologically invalid category of "race." What eventually must come is future public discussion as to when invidious discrimination on any basis – perhaps even on some basis that has not yet been thought of – cannot be tolerated.

As Margaret Mead said, each of us is unique, just like everyone else.

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:
- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: This is nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club November 7th! BOOK: Why We Believe in God(s): A Concise Guide to the Science of Faith by J. Anderson Thomson & Clare Aukofer.

Communitas Dinner Group: Also planned for 11/7!
Have Another Idea? Email or call us about it!

NEXT MONTH: J. GORDON MELTON on "IS AN ATHEIST AMERICA IN OUR FUTURE?"
> Sunday, October 4, 2015 <
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(about 1/2 mile west of the Sheraton on 114
- take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western)

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