

SAMPLE CHAPTER

# A HOUSE DIVIDED

Engaging the Issues  
through the Politics of Compassion



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## 2

# Racism

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image,  
according to our likeness."*

~ Genesis 1:26

Baltimore, Ferguson, Charlottesville, Charleston.

Trevon, Tamir, Sandra, Philando, and Freddie.

Kaepernick, Serena, Barkley, and Lebron.

White supremacy, white privilege, white fragility, and woke.

"Hands up, don't shoot." "I can't breathe." Black Lives Matter.

These are just some of the people, places, controversies, and catchphrases that have come to define the complexities of today's conversation about race in the U.S. Over the last decade, that conversation has changed dramatically. From police shootings to the mass incarceration of African Americans, from the resurgence of white nationalism to "taking a knee" during the National Anthem, many Americans are slowly realizing that a "post-racial America" is a fallacy and that systemic racism rests just beneath the surfaces of our society, institutions, politics, economies, and even churches. Our outrage is easily activated whenever some brazenly racist incident is exhumed for our news feeds. But our

brief flashes of indignation over these incidents often conceal our own racism and the racism woven into the fabric of the American way of life in which we all participate.

It's for this reason that a conversation about race can be both contentious and delicate. On the one hand, we know that blatant racism must be called out and resisted whenever we see it. On the other hand, because we participate in social systems that are inherently discriminatory, we know that we are unquestionably implicated at the very least in the more subtle, unconscious expressions of racism. How can we talk about race without the defensiveness, reflexivity, and scapegoating that accompanies such conversations? Is it possible to talk about race with such honesty and daring that we might be implicated, awakened, and transformed?

Our objective throughout this book is to set aside the sound bites, talking points, and caricatures that dominate our political conversations and take up the more important work of Christian ethics. In these pages, we are applying ultimate meaning to proximate concerns by inviting Scripture, Christian tradition, and our personal and collective experience of faith to inform how we think about, and respond to, particular social issues. Our concern is less about how we vote and for whom we cast our vote, and more about why we vote, and how our vote might contribute to a politics of love devoted to the shared values of universal care, concern, and commitment to the common good.

According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in February 2019, about six in 10 Americans (58 percent) say race relations in the U.S. are bad, and of those, few see them improving. Blacks are particularly gloomy about the country's racial progress. More than eight in 10 black adults say the legacy of slavery affects the position of black people in America today, including 59 percent, who say it affects it a great deal. About eight in 10 blacks (78 percent) say the country hasn't gone far enough when it comes to giving black people equal rights with whites, and fully one half say it's unlikely that the country will ever achieve racial equality.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/>

Given this widespread pessimism, how do we have honest and hopeful conversations about the complex issue of racism in America? Perhaps it begins by acknowledging our personal limitations and inherent ignorance. As I write this chapter, I am acutely aware of the irony of a relatively comfortable, privileged, white male from the south suburbs of Denver presuming to have something meaningful to say on the issue of race. What do I really know about race relations in America, and what wisdom can I possibly impart, from my limited, white, privileged experience, that will not sound paternalistic or reductionist?

I do not presume to have arrived on the issue, or to be “woke.” I simply want to share with you what I have discovered on my own journey toward greater awareness of racism in America, and with my own participation in systems, both visible and hidden, that perpetuate it. I want to begin with two stories that might open us to an honest conversation about this sensitive issue.

The first story is about a colleague who shared with me an experience she had late one night while on a business trip in a major city. She had just finished a long meeting and was walking alone to her car in a dark, mostly empty parking lot. Once inside, she attempted to start her car, only to discover that the battery was dead. There she was, alone, with a car that wouldn’t start, in a dark parking lot, stranded in an unfamiliar city past midnight.

As she hunted for her roadside assistance card, she noticed an older model truck driving slowly through the lot. To her it seemed as if the truck was prowling in her general direction. She checked and rechecked the locks on the doors and tried again and again to start the engine. The truck slowly approached and finally came to a stop in front of her car. In the dim light of the parking lot, she could see a tall black man emerge from the truck holding what appeared to be a thick rope. Her heart raced as he walked slowly toward her car. Flushed with fear and panic, she fumbled for her phone and started to dial 911, when suddenly the man knocked on her windshield, held up a pair of jumper cables, and said, “I work maintenance here, ma’am. I noticed earlier that you’d left your headlights on. You don’t have to get out of the car. Just pop the hood and I’ll help you get it started.”

All at once, her fear turned to relief, and then her relief turned to guilt. She wondered why she had been so afraid, and what her fear revealed about her unconscious beliefs and biases.

The second story is told by Dr. Kamau Bobb, who serves on the faculty at Georgia Tech and holds a global leadership position at Google. He was crawling along in rush hour traffic just before dusk, heading home from work, when red and blue lights suddenly flashed behind him. He pulled over, and the officer pulled over behind him. This, said Bobb, “is the singular moment in American life where Black men wish they were White women. This is the moment that drives fear into the hearts of Black people. Anything in the interaction with police can escalate to deadly outcomes... and there was no telling how this would go.”

The approaching officer reached the back fender and put his hand on his gun. Bobb was now fearful. He rolled down the window as the officer approached, and that was when he heard the voice: “Put your hands on the steering wheel where I can see them.” Bobb reached for his wallet, and again, he was ordered to put his hands on the wheel. Bobb says, “For White people... who typically say that if you’ve done nothing wrong, everything will be fine, this is the moment they don’t understand. This is the terror moment... the moment of anxiety at fever pitch.”<sup>2</sup>

After the arrival of another patrol car and several intense minutes of questioning and radio calls, the encounter ended without further escalation. But if you are Kamau Bobb, what do you do with the fear and humiliation of such an experience? Where does it go?

\* \* \*

Throughout this book, I am proposing axioms to help us find common ground and agreement on complex, divisive issues. An axiom is a simple and self-evident statement that serves as a premise or starting point for further reasoning and dialogue.

As we consider the topic of race in America, we begin with what is simple and self-evident:

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<sup>2</sup><http://kamaubobb.com/2019/01/police-computing-and-nationalism/>

**Axiom #1: How we think about racism is largely determined by our own particular race.**

For my friend stranded in the unlit parking lot, fearing the black man who ultimately came to her aid revealed her unconscious bias based on skin color and stereotypes. For her, and for many whites, racism is commonly understood as prejudicial attitudes and behaviors grounded in a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities. My friend is a good person for whom the term “racist” would seem entirely inappropriate. But that sudden awareness of her unconscious bias led to a profound and humbling sense of guilt.

But for Kamau Bobb, ordered to keep his hands on the wheel during a routine traffic stop, racism is more than just prejudicial attitudes and behaviors. He experiences it systemically in the common structures of everyday life that make the world unfair and unsafe for blacks, and that experience leads to a deep and chronic sense of humiliation and fear.

How we think and talk about racism is largely determined by the color of our skin, and our experience of living in that skin. Most whites understand racism primarily as prejudicial attitudes and behaviors. But most blacks experience racism primarily as systemic or systems-wide discrimination and injustice.

The fourth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas phrased this axiom another way: “Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver.” Aquinas suggested that we receive and perceive things not as *they* are, but as *we* are. Whatever we communicate to another person can only be received by that person insofar as he or she is able to understand it. This is why it can be so difficult to talk with a tourist from a foreign country, for example, or with a newborn infant, or your Golden Retriever, or your teenager. Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver.

So, what does this mean? It means that if we want to understand racism in the U.S., as uncomfortable as it might be for us, we have the moral responsibility to open our eyes and see our society more truthfully, and to become more receptive to what it is like to be

black in the U.S.

Here are some astonishing statistics that may help bring clarity to this conversation:

- Black men are about 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than are white men.<sup>3</sup>
- If you are black in America, you are six times more likely to be incarcerated than a white person.<sup>4</sup>
- The median black family has only 10.2 percent of the wealth of the median white family.<sup>5</sup>
- Blacks are about 2.5 times as likely to be in poverty as whites.<sup>6</sup>
- The unemployment rate for black workers is consistently about twice as high as it is for white workers.<sup>7</sup>
- The typical black worker makes 82.5 cents on every dollar earned by the typical white worker.<sup>8</sup>
- The homicide rate for blacks between the ages of 10–34 years is 13 times the rate for whites.<sup>9</sup>
- A black child is six times more likely as a white child to have or have had an incarcerated parent.<sup>10</sup>
- Although black children are approximately 16 percent of the child population nationally, they make up 30 percent of the child abuse and neglect fatalities.<sup>11</sup>

All of this begs the question: Are these statistics a consequence of something more systemic than individual prejudice?

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<sup>3</sup>[https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/police\\_mort\\_open.pdf](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/scans/police_mort_open.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>[https://www.epi.org/publication/50-years-after-the-kerner-commission/?mod=article\\_inline](https://www.epi.org/publication/50-years-after-the-kerner-commission/?mod=article_inline)

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S074937971831907X>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.epi.org/publication/mass-incarceration-and-childrens-outcomes/>

<sup>11</sup><http://blackchildlegacy.org/resources/child-abuse-and-neglect/>



The late writer David Foster Wallace told the story about two young fish that were swimming along when they happened to meet an older fish swimming toward them. The older fish nodded at them and said, “Good morning, boys, how’s the water?” The two young fish continued to swim on for a bit, when eventually one of them looked over at the other and asked, “What the heck is water?”<sup>12</sup>

Beyond our individual and often unconscious biases, is there something about the water in which we are swimming, something invisible in the society in which we live, that many who are white do not even see?

How we think and talk about racism is largely determined by the color of our skin and our experience of living in that skin. Acknowledging this simple truth leads us to our second axiom, which echoes the words of the contemporary black writer, Ta-Nehisi Coates:

**Axiom #2: “Race is the child of racism, not the father.”**

History proves that the exploitation of black persons came first, and only then did an ideology of unequal races follow. To make slavery work, we had to create an ideology of exploitation to support it and categories of race to legitimize it. Race is a social concept, not a scientific one.

This is not only historically, but also biblically, true. Genesis 1 takes us back to the very beginning, to the creation story, when Earth was a massive soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the abyss, giving birth first to light, then sky, land, plants and trees, stars. More life soon followed: fish, cattle, birds, reptiles, bugs, gnats. Then, finally, came God’s brightest idea of all: to form a creature not only out of God’s own breath or spirit, but in God’s own image. God called the creature “human,” *’ādām* in the Hebrew, which was God’s generic term for humankind. God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature” (Gen 1:26, *MSG*).

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<sup>12</sup><https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

“In our image, reflecting our nature.” Theologians call this the *Imago Dei*, the image of God, and it expresses the inherent and equal worth of all human beings, which does not recognize distinctions of skin color or race apart from the human race as a whole. People may have different skin color, but they belong to one human race descended from one parentage, all of whom are created in the image of God spiritually, rationally, morally, and bodily.

The idea of race is a fiction—a social construct birthed by a sinful ideology of supremacy called racism. “Race is the child of racism, not the father.” It took me a while to get my head around this, but when I did, I finally understood racism as more than personal prejudice based on skin color, but as an ideology that has imbedded itself in systems that have endured for over four hundred years in America.

This leads us to our fourth and final axiom:

**Axiom #3: Colorblindness is a myth that blinds us to the truth about racism.**

I grew up in the suburbs of Southern California in the 1970s and '80s, in a time and place in which it would have been unacceptable to utter a racial slur or racist comment. It was, as we understood it then, an era of complete racial integration in every aspect of society. Some of my favorite TV shows were “Soul Train,” “What’s Happening?” and “White Shadow.” I believed the cultural narrative that we are all the same and all equal, and that colorblindness was the antidote to racism. I believed in that beautiful dream about a world where people are judged “not by color of their skin but by the content of their character.” In Sunday school we sang, “Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight,” while our parents had sung, “We shall overcome.” It felt to a lot of white people as if the Civil Rights movement had finally accomplished the goal of a post-racial society.

But it never occurred to me in middle school or later in high school that in my middle-class suburban town there were very few black people. I believed with all my heart that we were all the same. I

didn't understand that if that were really true, we would all be living in the same place, sharing the same public spaces.

Only much later in life did I understand, in part, why that was not the case.

On June 22, 1944, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, was signed into law to help our World War II veterans adjust to civilian life by providing them with benefits, including low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans, and college tuition. It provided a massive infusion of capital for people who, after returning from war, would face extraordinary challenges in making ends meet and carving out a stable future for themselves and their families.

One important provision of the G.I. Bill was low interest, zero down payment home loans for service members, with more favorable terms on loans for new construction. Millions of American families moved out of urban apartments and flooded to the suburbs, and so began the suburbanization of America and the flight from urban centers.

But not everyone went.

Because the G.I. Bill programs were directed by local, white officials, many of our black veterans did not benefit like our white veterans did. Banks and mortgage agencies consistently refused loans to blacks. As millions of veterans went to back to school, only one-fifth of all blacks who applied for educational benefits went to college.

As the American suburbs flourished, our urban centers floundered. School funding was now tied to property taxes, which pulled the economic rug out from underneath inner-city education. Banks stopped giving loans to businesses in impoverished urban centers, a policy known as redlining. Shops on Main Streets were shuttered. Unemployment skyrocketed. And eventually our inner cities collapsed after this tragic game of social Jenga finally played itself out.

For the black community, "we shall overcome" felt a lot like "we've been overcome."

Meanwhile, whites were told that society had made progress on the issue of race, that we were all equal and could get along now. But it wasn't true. And the prophet Jeremiah cries out,

They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,  
saying, "Peace, peace,"  
when there is no peace (Jeremiah 6:14).

Imagine training for months to run a marathon, only to discover on race day that not all the runners start the race at the same place. In this race, some start at the five-mile marker, others at the 10-mile marker, and still others at the half-way point. When the starting pistol goes off, you're already losing. When you raise your complaint to the race director, you're told that if you'd only worked harder and trained better, you might have improved your position in the pack.

I admit that all of this talk of white privilege touches a tender nerve and sends me into a state of denial or guilt. Robin DiAngelo calls this "white fragility," a state in which even a minimum amount of racial tension becomes intolerable and triggers a range of defensive emotions and behaviors, including the outward display of anger and fear, and behaviors such as argumentation, microaggression, or silence.

A healthy alternative to feeling bad about being white is to know one's history. We can do nothing about our unconscious and unspoken biases unless we know our history. Our well-intentioned colorblindness keeps us blind to our history. When we know our history, we come to see that, in the words of William Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

So, what can we do? Where do we go from here?

Can I offer three suggestions?

First, if you're white, listen to people, especially to people of color, who are willing to share about their experiences of racism. By doing so, you will become a more informed student of history and of place so that you know the stories, experiences, and the

collective wounds of the people of color in your community. Such conversations can be uncomfortable and even triggering, but they create opportunities for deeper intimacy, greater understanding, and a sense of kinship grounded in a shared commitment to the common good.

Second, talk to others about what you don't understand about racism, and what you still need to learn. None of us has all the answers. All of us have unconscious biases and beliefs which, when made conscious through our thoughts and actions, lead to feelings of guilt and defensiveness. Kenosis, or self-giving, calls us to surrender the ego and to acknowledge our flaws and limitations. Lean into vulnerable conversations with honesty, courage, and grace for yourself and others.

And finally, where there is opportunity for relationships with people of different races and cultures, enter into them as deeply as the other will permit, with humility, because in the end, it's not right believing (orthodoxy) alone that will heal the racial divisions and wounds in our country, but also right loving (orthopraxis). The fruit of right loving is taking delight in the unique expressions of cultural diversity, including art, music, food, and language.

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## **Further Study and Reflection for Groups or Individuals**

### **A Prayer for Guidance and Grace**

God of justice, in your wisdom you create all people in your image, without exception. Through your goodness, open our eyes to see the dignity, beauty, and worth of every human being. Open our minds to understand that all your children are brothers and sisters in the same human family. Open our hearts to repent of racist attitudes, behaviors, and speech that demean others. Open our ears to hear the cries of those wounded by racial discrimination, and their passionate appeals for change. Strengthen our resolve to make amends for past injustices and to right the wrongs of history. And fill us with courage that we might seek to heal wounds, build

bridges, forgive and be forgiven, and establish peace and equality for all in our communities. Amen.<sup>13</sup>

### **Icebreaker**

When it comes to racism in the U.S, today, do you believe that the bigger problem is discrimination built into our laws and institutions, or discrimination based on the prejudice of individuals like us?

Do you agree that how we talk about race is largely determined by our own particular race or skin color? How have you experienced racism personally?

What is meant by the phrase, “white privilege?” What about “white fragility?” What emotions or reactions do these phrases stir up for you?

Why do you think race can be such a divisive or contentious issue for Americans?

### **Deep Dive**

If you’re not black, what did you learn in this chapter about what it’s like to be black in the U.S. today?

Do you agree that “color blindness” is an obstacle to addressing the systemic issue of racism in the U.S.?

What role did the G.I. Bill play in perpetuating institutionalized racism in the second half of the 20th century? Do you believe that the G.I. Bill favored whites over blacks? If so, how? And why?

How well informed are you about the history of racism in your own city or community? What can you share with this group about this history that others may not know?

### **Engaging the Text**

Read Genesis 1:24–27

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<sup>13</sup>[https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/prayers\\_reflections/prayer-for-racial-healing/](https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/prayers_reflections/prayer-for-racial-healing/)

In v. 26, God says, “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature.” What is this image?

How does the image of God reflect the fullness and diversity of race or skin color?

Do you agree that race is a social concept rather than a scientific and biblical one? Why did humans create categories of race?

The Bible has often been used to support racism. What are some ways you have heard or seen this happen?

### **Closing Prayer**

God of Heaven and Earth, you created the human family in your image, and endowed each person with dignity. Grant us your grace in eliminating the blight of racism from our hearts, our communities, and our social, civil, and religious institutions. Fill our hearts with love for you and for our neighbor as we work together with you to heal our land from racial injustice. Amen.