

CONFESSIONS OF A CHRISTIAN SUPREMACIST

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In this narrative, the author describes her journey as a progressive, white, U.S. Christian in comprehending the deeply embedded nature of her position of Christian superiority, which she names Christian supremacy. She indicates the obstacles and opportunities in dismantling Christian privilege for Christians and those who work with them in social justice-social action circles. The author questions how certain Christian beliefs and attitudes may prevent or promote anti-oppressive practice. The unique complexities, promises, and resources for grappling with the intersections of marginalized and privileged identities within Christian privilege work are highlighted.

A year ago I enrolled in a social work class called Disrupting Privilege through Anti-Oppressive Practice (for information on the pedagogy and structure of the course, see Walls, Roll, Griffin, & Sprague, in press; Walls et al., 2009). In the class, students were placed in groups associated with a specific kind of systemic privilege that they personally embodied. There was a white privilege caucus and an able-bodied privilege caucus. Though I shared both of those privileged identities, I was placed in the Christian privilege caucus in order to delve into the ways that my Christian identity had benefited me and oppressed others.

Despite my years of anti-oppression work, the language of Christian privilege was completely new to me. I had breathed the air of Christian privilege my whole life. I was a WASP pastor's kid from New England, a former foreign missionary, an ordained local church pastor, and currently a doctoral student in Christian social ethics. I was a serious theological and political progressive, a Christian living on the margins of my own religious tradition. I was a feminist, an activist in my denomination for the full inclusion GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer) Christians, experienced in interfaith work, and involved in the community for racial and indigenous justice. I was aware of the ravages of Christian domination and violence against marginalized groups throughout the ages. I had no compunction to speak about such matters openly. That it had never crossed my mind, not even once, that my identity as a Christian in this country was a privileged social location

was an obvious signal that it was. I did not find it too difficult to accept that the "knapsack" of Christian privileges with which I was associated were, indeed, real: the prevalence and positive portrayal of my Christian tradition and values dominating law, media, culture, and history; the comfort and security of being, speaking, and practicing my Christian faith without threat of violence; and the concrete ways I continue to benefit when atheists and other non-Christian traditions are excluded and marginalized. While I was stunned once again by recognizing this new layer of privilege, my consciousness was raised.

Throughout the first few weeks of the class, I consoled myself with the notion that because of my progressiveness, at the very least I was "better" than most other Christians. I wanted to clarify that I was *definitely* not like my fellow United Methodists George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. I distanced myself not only from the extremely intolerant, warring-type of Christian, but was also quick to see myself as different from the other student members of my Christian privilege caucus, who mostly defined themselves as evangelical.

Certain in-class experiences fostered my transformation. In a theatre of the privileged exercise, I embodied my position of distance from "other Christians." Literally separating myself from my own caucus members during the exercise helped me see that this cognitive behavior was a form of resistance to doing my own work and fully acknowledging the extent of my privilege. While I was distancing from the evangelicals in the caucus, there was

some parallel version of this resistant distancing that all of the members of the Christian privilege caucus were actually doing – each of us Christians distancing ourselves from other Christians whom we considered to be somewhere on the spectrum of religiously unenlightened to violently extreme. In fact, my behavior was hardly different. I was also a Christian who considered myself to be a better Christian and better person with better beliefs than others. Disassociating myself prevented me from dealing with a central issue: my own sense of righteousness, how I positioned myself in relation to people of other faiths or no religious faith, and the power wielded by my privileged group over others.

In another experiential exercise, the caucus members participated in a fish-bowl exercise, sitting in the middle of the room while other class members read statements from persons who experienced marginalization and oppression as a result of Christians' attitudes and behaviors. Some members of my caucus cried as we began to bear witness to the anger and pain that our Christian privilege caused among those who were marginalized by our Christian supremacy. I was aware at first that I did not feel more than an intellectual assent to what was being spoken, until one person read a statement: "I hate it when Christians think that I would be happier if I only believed what they believe." I felt my body take a defensive position. Somehow I felt accused, but of what? I had to ask myself, did I think people would be happier if they believed what I believed? I didn't want to believe that I believed that. It sounded so arrogant and, yes, privileged. I lived with this question for weeks until I could admit that yes, in fact, I did believe people would be happier if they *at least* believed in God. As I excavated (Kendall, 2006) my beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors, I had to acknowledge that in the past I had expressed feeling bad for those who didn't believe. Though perhaps more consciously tolerant and less conspicuously imposing, I had to confront the notion that I really accepted as true that my way of believing was superior to others. I had to reckon that I held a deep-down belief that my way was normal, better I

returned to a text we had read early in the quarter by Goodman (2001):

Superiority is not always conveyed in blatant and intentional ways. In reference to racism, bell hooks... calls this type of superiority "White supremacy." She defines it as the unconscious, internalized values and attitudes that maintain domination, even when people do not support or display overt discrimination or prejudice... This sense of superiority extends from the characteristics and culture of the dominant group to the individuals themselves. Oppression is commonly defined, in part, as the belief in the inherent superiority of one group over another. (p. 19)

I was coming to terms with the reality that it was not only Bush and Cheney, not only conservative evangelicals, but also I that operated in this world with a belief in the inherent superiority of my religion.

It was one thing to recognize that I continued to benefit from the structures of domination that I claimed to oppose. It was another to admit that I maintained those structures with this deep sense of superiority that I would have told you sincerely that I did not possess. Superiority, however well hidden, is still superiority and still imposes in its sense of truth and rightness. It is tempting at this early stage of Christian privilege work to paint "the problem" relative to Christian privilege in this country in conservative, evangelical terms. Certainly the Christian right in both its theological and political manifestations is an easy and often necessary target. But seeing only this part of the Christian community as the problem, would be to make a similar mistake as locating the problem of racism only in the white South. It does not get at the way in which an inherent religious superiority is

deeply and broadly entrenched in most all Christian people in this nation.

A year after this course ended, I was invited to be a facilitator for the next class' Christian caucus. Halfway into the quarter one of the co-facilitators pointed out that I was able to name easily some of the oppressor positions I embody and maintain: racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist. Yet she noted that I stumbled when I tried to label the oppressor group with which I had been selected to identify for the purposes of the class. This task of naming had remained unfinished from when I was a student in the class the previous year. In the week that followed, her question stayed with me. In the middle of the week, I heard a radio commentary reporting on Christian fundamentalism in the officer corps of the U.S. military, particularly as it plays out in the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq (*Democracy Now!*, 2009). This exposé described a Christian attitude and practice of religiously motivated domination that was so destructive and horrific that it could be labeled as nothing short of supremacist. I decided to take on the word for myself: Christian supremacist.

The term seemed extreme at first. I had to remind myself that part of my early work on Christian privilege was to not allow myself to distance from the extremes of my own group, a common dynamic in privilege work that Kendall (2006) illustrates in her own struggle where she, as a progressive, anti-racist white person wanted to disown racist white friends and family members. What also made the language difficult to use was how closely it is related to white supremacy. But the previous year's class had shown me how intertwined the project of white supremacy is with Christianity. Part of the tremendous potential of this Christian privilege work is the extent to which it lends itself to work on the intersections of oppression and privilege. While white privilege work connects directly to racial and ethnic oppression, Christian privilege work relates to a whole host of categories of oppression. It not only dominates other religious and atheistic traditions in this country, but is implicated in virtually every other category of oppression: racism, sexism, heterosexism,

ableism, classism, and an anthropocentrism that contributes to the destruction of the earth. Every one of these categories has been undergirded by Christian theological justifications. So, it seems even more relevant to call the phenomenon of Christian privilege by this more accurate descriptor named Christian supremacy.

But the intersectionality of Christian privilege work brings up other complications. While Christian traditions and scriptures have served as a source of oppression for many groups, they have also served as a source of resistance and liberation (Cone, 1990; De La Torre, 2002; Goss, 1993; Schussler Fiorenza, 1995). Christianity was the foundation for the system of slavery in the United States and a justification for racism and imperialism for centuries. Yet it has also been a basis for resistance for Africans and African Americans during slavery and the civil rights movement (Morris, 1986). Yet even as the exodus narrative of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible is a central theme for black liberation theology it has also been used to justify the conquest and devastation of indigenous communities (Tinker, 2004).

Not only can Christian ideology be mobilized for both oppression and liberation, but there is also within group stratification that gets played out. White, evangelical Protestantism (both in its historic and current manifestations) has dominated U.S. Christian culture (Marty, 1970; Smith, 1998) and in some cases has served to "other" Roman Catholics in racial terms (Ignatiev 1995; Miller, 1985).³ This Protestant supremacy showed itself in the second year in which I participated in the class, wherein both the Protestants and Catholic questioned whether or not the Roman Catholic faith tradition was a Christian tradition. Catholicism has also served as both a source of genocide and oppression for many in this country (Tinker, 1993), and as a source of cultural affirmation and survival for others (Haddad et al., 2003). How we sort out these complexities of Christian privilege makes the work especially rich and thorny.

The language of Christian supremacy resonates for me partly because I stand at the intersection of so many privileged identities.

Using this language prevents me from distancing myself as a progressive Christian from a tradition of domination whose history and current manifestation is nonetheless mine. I want to affirm the ways in which Christianity can provide special resources for the work of dismantling Christian and other forms of privilege: the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible and the person of Jesus interpreted as confronting oppressive establishments (Campbell & Rosenau, 2009; Borg, 1994). Having participated in two groups of Christians that have started this work, I am encouraged by its potential. Such work is – for some – an aspect of a deeper faith development, an inspiration to learn about other faith traditions, and a call to challenging Christian institutions to greater justice from the inside. Equally as compelling and inspiring to me are conversations coming out of a more radical reading of biblical scriptures encouraged by the challenges offered during the course of the class. For example, such investigations can help begin a process of recognizing the extent to which poverty and economics are at the heart of Jewish and Christian sacred texts (Boff & Pixley, 1989; Hoppe, 2004), and the ways in which Christian individuals and institutions have perpetuated class stratification as much as alleviated it (McCloud, 2007; Rieger, 1998). This can be a foundation for mobilizing Christian ideology not only for the purpose of disrupting Christian privilege, but for challenging class privilege as well.

Clark (2006) points out, however, that the liberation strain of Christian theology and history makes the identification of Christian privilege difficult in social justice communities. A Christian, faith-based “calling” from God to social justice is part of what makes the work of confronting Christian privilege especially hard for individuals. She counsels Christians to recognize the obvious historical limits to the liberative nature of Christian theologies and traditions in their impact on social justice.

There are myriad theological challenges in this work. Obvious among them is the role of the Bible. Many students have not dealt with reconciling traditional interpretations of scriptures that they still hold (for example, the

subordinate place of women in family and church or the moral condemnation of non-normative sexual and gender identities) that are in conflict with more just and egalitarian views. The issue of the Bible and its interpretation is most clear as students struggle with what to do with the heart of the Christian tradition itself: the superior claim about the unique saving power of Jesus. The first caucus struggled with the biblical verse attributed to Jesus, “I am the way, the truth and life. No one comes to the Father except by me.”⁴ All over the country on Sunday mornings, circles of children are sitting around being taught with this phrase that they are superior to other children who do not come to God by Jesus. Even liberal Christians take such a practice as completely normal, and would deny such a verse intends to convey a superior stance. But doesn’t it? If we watched a videotape of a white supremacist group training their children that “whiteness is the way, the truth, and the life,” we would be completely horrified. So what does it mean for ministers, social work practitioners, educators, and social justice workers to believe in sin, salvation, and hell? At first, some wanted to struggle with how they could continue to embrace these beliefs without seeming oppressive to others. Is there a less offensive but more loving, no less effective way of drawing people into a conversation about faith and salvation? I began to wonder if certain kinds of Christian beliefs and attitudes might be antithetical to anti-oppressive practice. Does a desire to engage in anti-oppressive practice ultimately mean sacrificing such beliefs and attitudes rather than forcing them underground? Many students imagined that rejecting such beliefs was an outright rejection of their faith in God. A dismantling of a privileged identity and its related oppressive institutions seemed a big enough challenge. That this work for Christians may also include dismantling a particular type of relationship with God and disrupting the interpretation of sacred texts seemed another.

The disruption of Christian privilege by challenging certain theologies and beliefs surfaces another unique issue for the work: Christians’ training in “defending the faith.”

The work of disrupting Christian privilege can be taken as an assault on the very framework in which we are taught by certain verses in the Bible that if we are being faithful, we will be attacked. In this line of thinking, "true" Christians are not privileged by the faith, but persecuted for it. This thought was evidenced in students' minds by their experiences of what they viewed as hostility and marginalization as a result of their faith expressions during graduate school. The dialogue about these experiences, however, provided opportunity for contextualizing minority religious experiences in the Bible and throughout history that are not comparable to the context of Christian privilege in the United States today. This discussion also served to reinforce another important message that is sometimes difficult for allies (across many axes of difference): that the individual experience of discrimination is not the same as the experience of oppression. For example, while a male student may have a genuine experience of male-bashing from a colleague in a classroom – an experience that is abusive and counter to values of social justice – that does not mean that men as a group are oppressed (for further discussion, see Goodman, 2001).

As I begin to use the phrase Christian supremacist around the halls of my predominantly white, liberal, mainline Christian seminary, most students look at me like I have lost my mind. They primarily deny what I am saying by appealing to the rationalizations I used with myself. I am not the problem. I am marginalized within my own faith tradition. The Christian liberationist tradition is the antidote to oppression. Christianity called me into social justice work. I am not "one of those kind of Christians." Within this institution dominated by the superiority of Christian assumptions, however, those who are not Christian seem to understand exactly to what I am referring. For me, resonance with those who have been marginalized because of religious intolerance and Christian privilege is evidence that there is something true about the language I am using. If part of the point of doing this work is becoming a better ally in anti-oppression work with marginalized people, then I will take my

cues from those who are on the receiving end of Christian supremacy.

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(Footnotes)

¹ While this list of privileges continues to expand, the first source in which I encountered such a list was Schlosser, 2003.

² The class instructors modified theatre of the oppressed experiential exercises and techniques so they could be used to explore the experiences of privilege.

³ Ignatiev and Miller both document Irish emigrant and immigrant experience in the early U.S. colonies and the United States, including historic evidence of their racialization. Ignatiev documents in particular the ways in which the Irish use their European ancestry and whiteness in turn to repress African Americans.

⁴ John 14:6



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