

White Privilege: A New Way of Looking at a Very Old Condition

Racism was long ago the intellectual product of pseudo science, came under study by social sciences and eventually by physical science. Whether you have studied formally or casually, a little or a lot, politically or spiritually, you must have noticed that until recently all of the focus has been on the lives (or natures) of black people. You may also have noticed that remedies have focused on a “charitable” model of assistance, ie., the privileged class “gives” some benefits, such as government programs designed to help minorities. Tokenism, the practice of letting one or two blacks into a privileged area also falls into this category.

Recently, a well-seasoned academic paradigm for studying racism has entered into popular culture. Referred to as “white privilege,” it focuses on the lives of white people and the functions that racism perform for them. The basic principle is that whites enjoy advantages that others do not. While the advantages are numerous and varied, much of the focus is on the economic enrichment that inures to whites as a result of racism. (One prominent scholar has characterized white privilege as “unjust enrichment.”) This is very evident in the area of family wealth accrual. While the proof that this is the case is abundant and that white privilege is more than a mere idea, remedies are nonexistent. History has shown that charity, government “handouts” and tokenism have failed to produce any substantial or lasting change. Are there other remedies? And why are we so reluctant to talk about reparations?

Perhaps the shortage of remedies and the reluctance to talk about reparations has something to do with concerns about “white fragility.” This concept holds that white privilege can be viewed as unstable racial equilibrium and that when this equilibrium is

challenged, the resulting social/racial stress can become intolerable and trigger a range of defensive responses. Does white fragility explain the poverty of meaningful responses to what we well know to be injustice of monstrous proportions? The concept of white fragility raises the issue of whether or not white privilege becomes just another impotent model for the study of racism with no tangible solution.

Maybe the time has come to move beyond analysis and into a deeper human dimension.

If we view racism as a spiritual disease, then it becomes incumbent upon Friends to define a spiritual basis to fund the necessary passion for meaningful social change. Just as Quakers who fought for abolition forged a spiritual and political alliance between the Bible and the Declaration of Independence to create and maintain the necessary moral fortitude to stand up to slavery, we can bring our faith into the modern world. Most, if not all of us, agree that we are one in the light. From this faith we might ask ourselves how our behavior is at odds with the deepest truth of who we are and be guided individually and corporately toward more real and sustainable improvement.