

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

A personal confession: I am a racist



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As a child, I had very positive contacts with African Americans, never recall telling a racist joke or using the "n-word." As an adult, I have tried to support equality for all, had excellent relationships with Black colleagues, and supported Black Lives Matter. But the recent events have shocked me into realization of how deep the systemic racism is in our society and how my eyes are being opened to its pervasiveness.

In the interfaith world, I am quite aware of how racial hatred is related to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. They all represent a built-in bias against people whose looks, dress and worship are different. Our cultural institutions and foundational documents are supposed to lead us to respect all people. "Liberty and justice for all." "All men are created equal, endowed by their creator with unalienable rights," "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," etc. But in reality they seem to be aspirations that do not work out in practice.

Our religious scriptures teach us that we are all created in the image of God, that we are to love our neighbors and even our enemies, and yet religious institutions are often segregated by race and perpetuate practices that do the opposite of our religious teachings.

As a white person, I was taught that our police were to protect us and keep us safe. Even when stopped for a traffic violation (fortunately not in the past few decades) I never had to fear being shot. Unfortunately, my experience has not been that of those growing up and living in Black communities, or being Black in predominantly white communities. The "warrior police" has more likely been their experience. Of course not all police are bad, and of course there are bad actors in the force, but even good people in a bad system can get caught up in denial, participate in groupthink, and get carried away with resorting to use of deadly force.

We should remember that early on, police had the task of tracking down escaped slaves and returning them to their masters. Is this attitude of treating Blacks as property rather than persons still an unconscious factor in the police culture? Property is to be controlled and made to serve the owner. Putting on the police uniform can also be putting on a historical mindset.

The era of cellphone cameras has let us all witness events of police brutality, blatant murder and provocations that escalate to physical struggles leading to someone being shot, even in the back. What was for many a fact of everyday life has now been graphically exposed for the world to see: the systemic racism in our country.

In addition to the daily news stories, I have watched a film and a video that have given me new insights in understanding our situation.

The film "Just Mercy," released last year in theaters and now available through many streaming services, vividly depicts a Harvard-educated Black lawyer being subjected to the very kind of treatments that were everyday experiences for others in his minority community. The film is based on his book describing his experience while working with prisoners on death row in Alabama. His encounters with police and prison officials while attempting to do his work help me understand the recent news reports from Minneapolis and Atlanta. It also helps me understand why Black people convicted of murder are 11 times more likely than whites to receive the death penalty, and that as many as one in nine on death row are actually innocent.



A demonstrator holds a sign during a Juneteenth event Friday at Rosa Parks Circle in Grand Rapids. Cory Morse, MLive.com

This movie is now available for free on many major streaming websites such as Google, Amazon and Netflix. Kaufman Interfaith Institute included it in this month's cinema discussion series, held this week. You can get more information about the film and our online discussion by going to our website, InterfaithUnderstanding.org.

My other video experience recently was the talk given by Willie Jennings at last year's January Series at Calvin University. Jennings, raised in Grand Rapids, is a Calvin graduate with a master's degree from Fuller Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from Duke University. He is now a professor of theology at Yale University. Jennings makes the connection between racism and geography, of how our hopes and dreams are tied to our location, our immediate environment.

His talk takes us back to the dreams of the early European settlers to what is now the United States. They saw the wide-open spaces as an opportunity to possess the land and turn it into what would sustain and provide value to them personally. They looked down on Native Americans as naive in their living with the land rather than seeking to possess and control it for their personal benefit.

Jennings sees this relationship to geography and one's environment as key to understanding the systemic racism in our country today. It goes back to this early white-European vision "based on mastery of this world. control of its

land and resources and a freedom to live unencumbered by anyone." Such a control was fundamental to slavery society. He sees it present as well in geographic restrictions such as zoning and financial constraints, or the actions of real estate brokers and the police. You can watch his presentation at: bit.ly/Calvin-Jennings.

I am now striving to be a "recovering racist," one who recognizes the problem and seeks to make corrections. I am seeing more clearly how our society and many of its institutions have been built on a racist premise, and I am discovering my own invisible complicity with that system that dehumanizes large segments of our population.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "In a free society some are guilty, but all are responsible." I am not guilty of killing George Floyd or for the shooting of countless Black people in our society, but I must take responsibility for my role in a society and its institutions that make these acts too commonplace.

I don't want to be racist, or even non-racist. I want to be anti-racist. The path is not totally clear to me. But I believe it begins with confession, and with increased awareness of society's institutions and assumptions that permit hatred based on race, skin color, immigrant or refugee status, or religious practice.

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