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Today

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Our Country is the World, our Countrymen are all Mankind

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Jesus Loves White People

Why are we afraid to admit that 'white privilege' exists?"

Bill O'Reilly appeared on [The Daily Show \(10/16/14\)](#) ostensibly to promote a new book, but host Jon Stewart wanted to indulge a pet project instead: for years he's been trying to get O'Reilly, a long time sparring partner, to admit that there is such a thing as "white privilege," that there are certain obstacles not in front of white people, certain currents for which we do not have to swim upstream. O'Reilly would have nothing of it. The bottom line, according to him, is that "If you work hard, get educated, and are an honest person, you can make it in America."

O'Reilly was as frustrated as Stewart. "Maybe you haven't figured out," he told his host, "that there is no more slavery, no more Jim Crow, and the most powerful man in the world is a black American and the most powerful woman in the world, Oprah Winfrey, is black!" In the end though, whether from Stewart's badgering or impeccable logic, or just to end the interview in the time allotted, O'Reilly admitted that blacks do have to "work harder" at working hard, at getting educated, and (perhaps, though they didn't go there) at engaging the world with honesty. Stewart then posed a question which neither he nor O'Reilly took time to answer: "Why is it that white people get so defensive about this?" Why are we afraid to admit that white privilege exists? I'd like to propose three answers which in the end meld into one single larger more fundamental question: "Why are we afraid to admit that Jesus loves us all unconditionally?"

1. To admit white privilege is a blow to our egos."

We like to think we "made it" because we worked harder than the next guy, was smarter than most, was more honest than the dirty tax gatherer and sinner. Perhaps we were. But perhaps we were also assisted by a tailwind. Track and Field recognizes *wind assistance*. Spanish long jumper Ivan Pedroso jumped 8.96 meters in 1995, beating the world record by one centimeter, but officials denied him the record because there had been a tailwind that day above the allowable maximum of two meters a second. His jump was still an incredible feat but he couldn't claim to be the best in the world. Wind assistance in athletics is different than steroids usage in breaking a world's record. We don't accuse Pedroso of cheating, but who's the dishonest one in the end when outside assistance is not admitted?

2. To admit white privilege is to confess America's on-going historical tension."

America, we are often told, is an idea, the premise that "all men are created equal" and that government could be and should be "of the people, by the people, for the people." The fact that it was at the dedication of a cemetery (Gettysburg, PA) where Lincoln referenced both these phrases indicates that tension has existed in the United States since our founding. If a country can somehow be an idea, it is also inescapably geography and population, borders and bodies, some of which were black (whether freed or slave), Indian, or female. When we said that "all men are equal," we didn't mean *them*.

Back then, America belonged to white people. (I originally put quotation marks around the word “belonged” but removed them.) Jefferson, a slaveholding President, paid good money for the portion that I currently live in, and he had Andrew Jackson waiting in the wings to evict the former inhabitants. To admit that white privilege exists today feels like shame, like we are still not living up to the best ideal of our selves. America was posited as an “experiment.” Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “To evils which are common to all democratic peoples [the Americans] have applied remedies which none but themselves had ever thought of before; and although they were the first to make the experiment, they have succeeded in it.” What if De Tocqueville, writing when America was less than a century old, was premature in his judgment? What if the experiment continues, undetermined as to success or failure? We don’t blame someone for feeling unsettled or fearful, but who’s the uneducated one in the end when America’s historical tension is not admitted?

3. To admit white privilege is to make the American experiment now OUR turn: will we implicate ourselves by not sharing that privilege?”

“There has been a systemic—a systemic—systemized subjugation of the black community, would you not agree?” Stewart asked O’Reilly. “That was *then*; this is *now*,” O’Reilly insisted, before referencing the absence of slavery and Jim Crow and the existence of Obama and Oprah. To admit that white privilege is *now*, doesn’t mean that we as a nation have returned to the age of slavery or segregation, nor that our generation is guilty for those sins. It does mean that we are *now* responsible to act *now* on what we know *now*. Why do we think that our generation of whites will escape America’s historic tension? A good portion of Stewart and O’Reilly’s exchange dealt with O’Reilly’s childhood in the lower-middle-class but segregated community of Levittown, NY. White New Yorkers in Lincoln’s day enlisted in the Union Army. White New Yorkers in King’s day enlisted as Freedom Riders. O’Reilly is not responsible (guilty) for benefitting from the privileges of growing up in Levittown—indeed, he had no choice in the matter—but who’s the lazy one in the end who doesn’t enlist when an injustice is admitted?

No one likes to feel weak, as if they are reliant on someone else’s help, as if they needed the cards stacked in their favor in order to win the game. No one likes to feel ashamed, like we fail to live up to our ideals, like the high-minded words of liberty are spoken by hypocrites when spoken by us. No one likes to feel guilty, like by having benefitted from the system, we have participated in the “systemized subjugation of the black community.” There are plenty of good reasons not to admit to ourselves the existence of white privilege. But there is one better reason for admitting that it does exist: because

until we do so, we will never truly know how much God in Christ Jesus loves us. In O’Reilly’s formula, the problem I most excruciatingly feel is not in how burdensome hard work, education, or honesty might be. What is killing me is the relentless oppression I feel in trying to “make it in America.” (What does that even mean? The great Jay Gatsby never knew, even when making-it-in-America became his murderer.) We have to perform. We have to succeed. We have to achieve. We have to be the best. The weak, the ashamed, the guilty—they don’t “make it.”

The one great sign that Jesus loves white people is not white privilege, just as it is not Manifest Destiny, economic prosperity, world hegemony, or an Olympic medal count. The one great sign that Jesus loves us is the he died on the cross to become the victory for our weakness, the cleansing for our shame, the forgiveness for our guilt. The Apostle Paul knew his own version of white privilege in a moral universe. “If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more,” he wrote, “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (Phil 3:4-6). When we read that list with modern eyes we think, “Oh Pharisees and persecutors—bad,” but Paul was admitting his privilege (things he had no control over by birth), while also pointing out his hard work, education, and honesty (which were the result of his own good decisions.) These things were indeed “gain” to him (v. 7) and he didn’t stop being any of things, including zealous and blameless, when he followed Jesus Christ. What he did receive however in admitting and repudiating privilege was “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord” (v. 9).

The Psalm that begins with the question “Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing?” ends with the words “How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!” (Ps 2). Refuge is reserved for those who admit they are refugees. In the end, there appears to be a difference between privilege and blessedness. Which one do you want?

- One of the People

Publishing Notices:”

If you would like to make a comment, please write to editor@theliberator.today. The inaugural (and explanatory) issue of *The Liberator Today* can be accessed [here](#). Despite previous plans, we are still not yet ready to re-publish a Page Three on Thursdays.

“On January 1, 1831, without subscribers and without money, with paper procured on credit and with a borrowed press, the first issue of The Liberator appeared in Boston—and reappeared every Saturday for the next 35 years.” (from The Making of an Abolitionist: William Lloyd Garrison’s Path to Publishing The Liberator.)