

Asset-Based Anti-Racism vs. Guilt-Based Anti-Racism: What works and what doesn't?

by Dr. Kenneth Christiansen

This is the consistent function of racist ideas—and of any kind of bigotry more broadly: to manipulate us into seeing people as the problem, instead of the policies that ensnare them.

Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist*, p.8.

Thanks for coming this evening. During this next half hour, I hope to add light rather than heat to a subject I suspect we all care about, namely, anti-racism.

The first question I want to address is, why am I using these terms, Asset-Based Anti-Racism and Guilt-Based Anti-Racism? Both of these terms are descriptions of existing practices, not new inventions. As descriptive terms they lift up key qualitative differences between two approaches to anti-racism, both having long histories. They are not equal or convergent paths. Nor do they produce similar results.

The point of using the term Asset-Based Anti-Racism is that everyone fighting the fight comes into the arena on an equal basis, as an asset. Not a guilt-laden liability. Asset-Based Anti-Racism asks groups of people who are collaborating across any and all demographic lines 1) to identify specific policies, specific patterns of injustice, discrimination and/or oppression encountered in this time and place; 2) identify potential solutions, changes that need to be made, to accomplish greater justice; 3) communicate well to mobilize everybody available from any background who will share the moral outrage and actively support the solutions identified; and 4) work together in what Rev. William Barber calls a “Fusion Coalition” to accomplish the common goal(s) and achieve greater social justice (*The Third Reconstruction*, pp. 50-53). [Explain in a footnote.]

Asset-Based Anti-Racism describes the basic approach taken by Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its allies throughout the 1960s, and by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) up until May of 1966 when Caucasian participation was eliminated. (John Lewis records this moment, and his feelings about it, in *Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, p 380-81.) Currently, Asset-Based Anti-Racism is operative in the work of many Church Based Community Organizations (CBCOs) that include UU churches on their rosters. More about CBCOs later.

The alternative approach to Asset-Based Anti-Racism is Guilt-Based Anti-Racism. Guilt itself has a questionable history as a motivator. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Collective guilt, guilt laid on a large group of people, works only if most or all of the members of the group acknowledge culpability. As we know, this is rare. Some research has been done to ascertain the extent to which collective guilt does or doesn't work as a motivator in real life situations. We will get to that in a moment.

In the Guilt-Based Anti-Racism approach to greater justice, white individuals are asked to own all the racist and oppressive actions committed by white people in any time or place; confess their involvement in the wrongs done by way of the benefits they have received by being born white; and

affirm what is expressed by Robin DiAngelo on page 149 of her book, *White Fragility*, "... a positive white identity is an impossible goal. White identity is inherently racist; white people do not exist outside the system of white supremacy."

This approach is based on Critical Race Theory. In Critical Race Theory, there is no way for white people to escape from participation in collective guilt. Racism is everywhere. If you don't see it, you just aren't looking. If you react negatively to the charge of being racist, you are "fragile." Or worse. This is the foundation for "Guilt-Based Anti-Racism" and it is currently a very widespread theory.

To summarize, these are the basic alternatives for Caucasian involvement in anti-racism:

1) To see each other as assets. To collaborate as equals across all demographic lines to identify specific policies that need changing. To share empathy and moral outrage. To work together to get needed changes accomplished, whatever it takes and however long it takes.

2) To focus inward. To accept guilt for centuries of wrongdoing by members of a socially constructed race with which you are asked to completely identify. To acknowledge one's participation in White Supremacy Culture (WSC) and the advantages one has received from White Privilege. To scour the soul for any and all vestiges of WSC including, from Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones' list, a reliance on logic, reason and evidence rather than the truths conveyed by stories; a sense of urgency about everything; fears about making mistakes; worship of the written word.

I am committed to the idea that we cannot achieve policy changes unless we work together across all racial and ethnic boundaries. It's a really big question: how do you view potential allies? Do you view them as guilty liabilities because of membership in a group with greater power? Do you view them as wounded individually and collectively because of membership in a group with less power? Or do you view them as valuable, co-equal assets in a common struggle? I opt strongly for the latter and I think you should also!

I am going to shift gears and talk about research study of the efficacy, the actual functioning, of guilt-based motivations for policy change. I have read quite a few academic research studies on guilt as a motivator. Most of them are very left-brained and statistical and don't have a good story connected with them. One that does have a good story is titled *Of Saints and Sinners: How Appeals to Collective Pride and Guilt Affect Outgroup Helping*.ⁱ The study was done in Holland. The authors studied whether appeals to collective pride, or appeals to collective guilt, were more effective in motivating people to take actions to help a disadvantaged group. Participants in the study were told one of two stories. One story was intended to inspire feelings of collective pride in relation to the participants' Dutch identity. The other was intended to inspire a sense of collective guilt. Both the collective guilt story and the collective pride story dealt with how Dutch people treated Jews during World War II. Both were true. After hearing either one of these stories, questions were asked that identified how supportive the individual was for the Dutch government to continue to aid Jewish families that were significantly damaged by the Nazis.

Another variable played a key role in the study, namely, how strongly did the subjects of the study identify with being Dutch as opposed to simply being human? Everyone in the study was Dutch and would be identified by an outsider as Dutch. Individually, however, people can feel very different

levels of emotional connection with their ingroup. Study subjects who very strongly identified as being Dutch were referred to as “high identifiers” while those with weaker bonds were referred to as “low identifiers.”

The collective guilt story focused on Dutch citizens who collaborated with the Nazis in their persecution of Jews during WWII. Many Dutch citizens did so collaborate. The collective pride story, on the other hand, focused on Dutch citizens who hid Jews in their homes (Anne Frank being the prime example) and sabotaged Nazi efforts to persecute Jews in other ways. There were also many of this kind of Dutch citizen.

Even though this study was being done sixty-five years after the end of World War II, questions related to helping, or not helping, Jews were still relevant. For instance, the Nazis confiscated property from Jewish families including family heirlooms and many of these have never been returned to their rightful owners. Many Jewish families who saw their homes taken and businesses destroyed have not fully recovered. The Dutch government could do more to help Jews in either or both of these areas. This is similar to the question of reparations in this country.

What did the study reveal? Overall, persons who were told a story that inspired collective pride in their Dutch identity expressed more empathy for Jews. They were also more willing to support additional government help to Jewish families for recovering lost heirlooms and righting other wrongs that happened during WWII than were persons who were told a story that inspired collective guilt in relation to their Dutch identity.

The most extreme differences came between “high identifiers” and “low identifiers.” To “low identifiers,” people for whom their Dutch identity wasn’t emotionally important, hearing a pride story or a guilt story didn’t affect their level of empathy or willingness to help Jews. They were more willing to help. On the other hand, “high identifiers,” persons for whom being Dutch was emotionally very important, there was considerable difference in their responses to the two stories. While a collective pride story motivated empathy and support for positive action, a collective guilt story turned them off.

What does this study have to say to our approaches to race and culture in the UUA? Or more generally in the USA today? Is the emphasis on White Supremacy Culture a good thing? This study would suggest that it isn’t, that it may be provoking white American “high identifiers” to move closer to white nationalism.

“Low identifiers” on the other hand, a description likely to fit UUA members if they are at all serious about the Seven Principles, can absorb a collective guilt story and not run away. Nonetheless we need to ask the question, how much more energy would there be in the UUA for positive action if we told more collective pride stories? This is an important question for us. What contemporary collective pride stories are available?

Many of our UU congregations participate in Congregation Based Community Organizing (CBCO). CBCO involves interfaith, multi-race and multi-class efforts to bring about specific changes in the communities surrounding these congregations. While there are five national networks of Church Based Community Organizations, I am most familiar with the Direct Action & Research Training Center (DART). There are eleven DART organizations in Florida cities; two each in Kansas, Kentucky, South Carolina and Virginia; and one each in Georgia, Indiana, Ohio and Tennessee.

Each local DART organization has a unique name. I belong to ICARE, the Interfaith Coalition for Action, Reconciliation and Empowerment in Jacksonville, Florida. 38 religious congregations are part of ICARE, more than half of them being African-American. Both UU congregations in Jacksonville are very active participants in this work.

All of the ICARE congregations have House Meetings in the fall where individuals identify community issues that affect them. Issues identified in House Meetings are brought to a vote at the Community Problem Assembly. Next, Research Committee members talk with local stakeholders and persons affiliated with groups in other cities that have faced the same challenges. Issue cuts need to be both urgent and winnable, even if it may take multiple years to gain the win. This work comes to a head at the Nehemiah Assembly each spring. Attendance at Nehemiah Assemblies averages 1,500 to 1,800 member of ICARE congregations.

Office holders and other persons with the power to make decisions come to the Nehemiah Assembly because their constituents are there. All ICARE offices and activities are integrated except, perhaps, for the House Meetings that are only as integrated as the individual congregations are integrated.

What has ICARE accomplished lately?

- It took 8 years to get policing organization in our county, and eventually throughout Florida, to stop arresting youths for a list of 12 common youthful offenses and issue Civil Citations instead. Civil Citations take a counseling and restitution approach and there is no arrest record. The recidivism rate for youths given Civil Citations is about 4 %, compared to over 20% for youths arrested.
- We ushered Restorative Justice practices into Jacksonville's public schools with the strong support of the current Superintendent.
- We shamed the city into supporting a Day Resource Center for homeless people. This took about six years.
- We are currently working to get the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office (JSO) to provide 40-hour Crisis Intervention Team training for a significant portion if not all of the officers who answer calls. The former sheriff of a neighboring county estimates that one or two calls answered by an officer every day involve mental health or substance abuse situations in which guns and tasers aren't well-suited de-escalation tools.
- Several years ago, one of our ICARE Network Members in the B'Hai congregation called JSO to help calm down her ex-husband, a Viet Nam vet with PTSD. The officers calmed him down alright, by choking him to death. This incident was never in the news, but it fits a national pattern. If officers are going to answer these kinds of calls, they need different tools for de-escalation than they presently possess. We are working on it.

I could share more but I think it is time for questions.

ⁱ Esther van Leeuwen, Wilco van Dijk, and Ümit Kaynak. *Of Saints and Sinners: How Appeals to Collective Pride and Guilt Affect Outgroup Helping* found in Group Processes and Intergroup Relations, Volume 16 number 6, pp 781-796.