

Summary of Information Concerning UU Conflicting Anti-Racism Efforts

By Greg Olsson, July 9, 2020

Differences of opinion among Unitarian Universalist (UU) members would ordinarily be expected and tolerated, given our seven principles. However, in recent years, differences have been heavily criticized and even suppressed by otherwise well-meaning persons and UU groups. These efforts have focused mainly on only recognizing one type of anti-racism remedy, and rejecting alternate remedies. This has been accompanied by censoring other voices, with much pain inflicted on long-time UU ministers and members. One minister has recently been censured and severed from the UU Ministers Association (UUMA). Some members have felt it necessary to resign when their concerns were ignored or rebuffed by UU leadership.

Four sources of information about the crisis the UUA has brought about, with its approach to anti-racism, are summarized. It should be clear almost all UU members endorse dismantling racism. What the crisis is about is the single-minded endorsement by the UUA of only one approach to anti-racism, an approach identifying what is termed White Supremacy Culture as the cause of racism. This idea involves characterizing all white persons as racist and expecting white persons to confess their guilt. Those whites who object are considered to be showing “White Fragility” by some anti-racist proponents. This impasse will hopefully eventually be resolved through reconciliation, because people on both sides have good intentions. What the information presented below will ideally provide is a better understanding of this crisis for UU members.

The first three items in the list below summarize the ideas being suppressed or rejected by the UU hierarchy, which includes the UU Association (UUA) and the UUMA. Item 1 summarizes the book written by the censured Rev. Eklof, which was criticized because it questioned the anti-racist methods of the UUA. This summary also sketches what alternative approaches to anti-racism efforts could be, in the sections describing Dr. Schneider’s book (item 2), and Rev. Christianson’s paper (item 3). Item 4 describes Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun’s effort to redefine “White Supremacy Culture”, a key concept used by some to further their approach to anti-racism.

1. Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof wrote *Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister*. This book raises questions about Unitarian Universalist practices, which ought to initiate a discussion by reasonable people, in the UU tradition, and provide fodder for possible progress. Instead the book provoked an attack by those in the UUA hierarchy. The questions Rev. Eklof asked include:

- How the culture of safetyism, identity politics, and political correctness (which some call the ‘politics of resentment’) is changing the UU religion, America’s most liberal religion
- Why there are reasons for splitting the UU Association, into a Unitarian and a Universalism branch, as existed before the UU merger in 1961

- Why the charges concerning racism and white supremacy within the UU Association are not as simple as some assume, but perhaps reveal emotional thinking without evidence of substantiated facts or sound reason.

2. **Dr. Anne Larason Schneider**, a retired political science professor and UU member, wrote the book *A Self-Confessed White Supremacy Culture: The Emergence of an Illiberal Left in Unitarian Universalism*. The book discusses many relevant topics to anti-racism efforts and the role of the UUA and UU churches and members:

- What is the new "White Supremacy Culture"? As described by Schneider, the idea developed in the early 1990s, and "White supremacy" was defined by 1993 as "an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples of European origin; for the purpose of establishing and maintaining wealth, power, and privilege." Schneider continues: "The new definition of White Supremacy Culture now is moving beyond colleges and universities to other organizations such as Unitarian Universalism, and this is likely to continue as there is an odd appeal (for some people of all races) to the notion that White people are all racists and White culture since the enlightenment has been of benefit to White people and exploits People of Color."
- Is the Jones/Okun White Supremacy Culture Paradigm Useful for Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppression Work? Schneider explains why not.
- Unintended Consequences of Using the White Supremacy Culture Strategy for Anti-Racist Work. Here Schneider presents the views of many on the problems resulting from using the White Supremacy Culture approach to anti-racism. Included is a listing of the comments on the UUreddit link in response to the 2017 General Assembly when the UUA introduced the White Supremacy Culture theory for its anti-racist /anti-oppression work.
- How the White Supremacy Culture Anti-Racist Movement Banned a UU Minister and his Book from a UU National Conference. This chapter describes the censuring of Rev. Eklof because of his book and supposedly his refusal to meet with UUA persons about it. I found this chapter the most illuminating about the authoritarian actions taken by the UUA.
- The Evergreen State College Case, the San Francisco School Board case, and other examples of illiberal policies or practices carried out by persons conducting anti-racism
- White Privilege, Implicit Bias, Micro-Aggressions, White Fragility: Are These Concepts Useful in Anti-Racist / Anti-Oppression Work? Schneider argues they are not useful, because of the lack of evidence.
- The Slippery Slopes of Using the White Supremacy Culture Strategy for Anti-Oppression Work: We Need a New Strategy. This last chapter is especially relevant because Schneider discusses over 27 pages of the chapter various methods of dismantling racism.

This book also includes as appendices sixteen relevant documents. Dr. Schneider concludes her writing with this paragraph:

"Training for social justice work should focus on oppression, not just race, but oppression wherever it is found; and it must support democratic values. It should have a new message -- not one of White Supremacy Culture or racism or White privilege -- but an inspiring, inclusive, hopeful message of how people of all races can work together to produce public policy that works for fairness and compassion for all. We need a message of hope instead of guilt or discouragement; a message of inspiration instead of despair; a message of inclusion instead of segregation; a message that breaks down barriers of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality to find commonalities even as we cherish our differences."

3. **Rev. Dr. Kenneth Christiansen**, a retired Professor of Religion and Sociology, wrote a paper recently which is a good summary of the conflict between the two anti-racism approaches. The paper is entitled "Asset-Based Anti-Racism, vs. Guilt-Based Anti-Racism: What works and what doesn't?" I will summarize this paper here with quotes from his paper:

- "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."
 - "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."
- "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."
 - "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.”
- Christianson summarizes, “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.

4. **Kenneth Jones and Dr. Tema Okun** redefined "White Supremacy Culture" in 2001 using "a list of characteristics of white supremacy culture which show up in our organizations". There are fifteen of them. Briefly, these are: Perfectionism, Sense of Urgency, Defensiveness, Quantity Over Quality, Worship of the Written Word, Paternalism, Either/Or Thinking, Power Hoarding, Fear of Open Conflict, Individualism, Progress is Bigger, More, Objectivity, and Right to Comfort.

- This definition is perplexing as many of these characteristics, when carried to extreme, have long been identified by business organization experts as problems that any effective organization needs to address and modify.
- In addition, there is no evidence offered to tie these characteristics to white persons specifically, in contrast to people of color (POC).
- A major problem with the use of the term "White Supremacy Culture" is that it will be confused with the white supremacy as a belief and policy for some racist people, as racism has had a long history in the United States.