

## GUIDES FOR CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

*This guide (and others in the series) is an initiative of the Office of the Bishop and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. It is intended to help church members consider how they might respond to contemporary ethical issues. It is meant for use in personal reflection and is not an 'official' statement of the church on the topic. I am grateful to Nick Schwarz, Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, for his ongoing work on this project.*

*Bishop Paul Smith  
Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand  
1 July 2022*

# RACISM

## Learning about racism

### **What is racism?**

A 'race' is a group of people who have (or are presumed to have) common ancestors, and have some physical characteristics in common, eg the colour of their skin, the colour and shape of their eyes, the shape of their nose, and their hair type and colour.<sup>1</sup>

Racism is an ideology (or system of beliefs) that teaches that:

- a person's race is indicative of their character and likely capabilities
- people of some races are naturally superior (in terms of character, intelligence and attractiveness) and people of other races naturally inferior
- the lives of people of 'superior races' are of greater value than the lives of people of 'inferior races'
- people of 'superior races' should have greater rights than people of 'inferior races'.

People who hold racist beliefs, therefore, regard race as a matter of significance. They classify other people by race and use race as a basis for making assumptions about their character and abilities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Some people reject this use of the word 'race' by appealing to the biological sciences, where a race is narrowly defined as a subspecies of animal or plant. They argue that dividing modern humans into 'races' is a category error because studies of human genetics show that humans are not genetically diverse enough to be divided into subspecies; they are all the one species, *homo sapiens*. However, if this narrow definition of 'race' was accepted and it was no longer used to mean differences in physical appearance between human sub-groups, people would almost certainly find another word with that meaning to replace it.

Some go so far as advocating that multi-racial societies be governed and regulated in ways that preserve the power and privilege of the allegedly 'superior race'.

People are drawn to the belief that they are members of a 'superior race' because it gives them:

- a special and distinctive identity
- a sense of superiority
- a heightened sense of security via greater entitlement to things of value in society
- scapegoats to blame when things go badly
- a smaller group of people they are obliged to care about.

Racist beliefs have led to terrible injustices. People have drawn on racist beliefs to mistreat their fellow human beings in a variety of ways, including stealing their land and driving them off it, kidnapping and enslaving them, trying to eradicate their languages and cultures, and treating them as vermin and killing them.

The following are distinct from racism but integral to it:

- othering, ie sorting people into 'us' and 'them', insider and outsider, friend and foe. Forming tribes appears to be a natural human instinct. We like to think we are unique and special
- ethnocentrism, ie the tendency to see one's own culture as natural, normal and right, and other people's cultures as strange and objectionable. Ethnocentrism has manifested itself historically in cultural imperialism, ie where colonising peoples imposed their culture on colonised peoples
- xenophobia, ie fear or dislike of foreigners
- negative stereotyping (or demonising and dehumanising), ie attributing to all people of another group the same objectionable qualities so as to induce fear or hostility or contempt towards them, eg that they are primitive, animal-like or monstrous and, therefore, dirty, stupid, unfeeling, dangerous and untrustworthy. It then seems right to keep them under surveillance, control their activities and treat them harshly to keep them weak and dispirited
- prejudice (or bias), ie drawing on negative stereotypes to negatively prejudge people of other racial groups: assuming the worst about them; never giving them the benefit of the doubt; blaming/scapegoating them for society's ills – while at the same time positively prejudging people of one's own racial group as more deserving of our sympathy, tolerance and forgiveness
- partiality and double standards, ie not accepting, and not acting as though:
  - the lives of people of all races are equally valuable
  - people of all races should be equally free to seek and enjoy the same good things, eg possessions, opportunities, amenities and living standards
  - we should be equally sympathetic, tolerant and forgiving towards people of every race.
- cruelty, which can range from callous indifference to other people's suffering to taking pleasure in inflicting (emotional and/or physical) pain on others and humiliating them.

### ***Some ways racism manifests itself in Australia today***

- Racial injustices (past and present) are denied, trivialised or regarded with apathy.
- People are resented and made to feel unwelcome because of their race.
- People are put down or maligned because of their race.
- People of particular racial groups are stereotyped as being of bad character, so they regularly experience prejudice, for example:
  - Police treat them with extra suspicion and fine or arrest them at higher rates than other people who do the same things.

- Shop assistants are more likely to be cold, unhelpful and suspicious towards them.
- Taxi drivers are more likely to refuse to stop and pick them up.
- Healthcare workers and social workers jump to conclusions about them and are less helpful to them than others.
- Employers are less likely to hire them.
- Banks are less likely to give them loans.
- Landlords are less likely to accept their applications for rental housing.
- Their requests to hire equipment, vehicles or venues are more likely to be denied, or they will be required to pay higher than usual bonds.
- Their loyalty to Australia is frequently called into question.
- People are assumed to be less intelligent, less capable of feeling emotions like love and grief and naturally contented with a lower status and standard of living.
- Adults scarred by racism shape their children to believe that the world is against them.

### **Systemic racism**

When someone claims that racism is 'systemic' in an institution or a society, they are usually claiming that:

- The institution or society operates in ways that advantage (whether intentionally or unintentionally) members of the dominant race, and which disadvantage, marginalise and otherwise make life unpleasant and difficult for people from other racial and cultural backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>
- The people who hold positions of power and influence in the institution or society are failing to take action to rectify the racial injustice that is occurring within it.

The terms 'institutionalised racism' and 'structural racism' are often used as synonyms for systemic racism.

### **Some contentious claims about racism**

Some academics and activists from minority racial groups define racism as 'prejudice plus power'. They claim that people can only be racist if they possess the power to institutionalise their racial ideology and subjugate people who they consider inferior. Many people are unpersuaded by this claim. They think if somebody has racist beliefs, it is reasonable to call them racist regardless of their capacity to institutionalise their prejudice.

Another claim that many people consider contentious is that race-neutral (or 'colourblind') policies can be racist. This claim is hard to understand unless it is explicitly made in the context of countries like the USA and Australia, where racism has left a legacy of racial disadvantage. In these contexts, race-neutral policies such as anti-discrimination laws, while obviously a step in the right direction, are in themselves insufficient to bring about racial equality.<sup>3</sup> People who make this claim believe that groups that have gained wealth, privileges and opportunities through past and/or present racism have a moral duty to redistribute them

---

<sup>2</sup> The inference is that the correct path for an institution or society to take is to adopt a policy of generous multiculturalism, ie to validate minority cultures and make generous allowances for minorities to express their culture. To do otherwise (eg expect minorities to integrate or assimilate) is not merely ethnocentric but racist.

<sup>3</sup> Here racial equality is intended to mean not just equal in terms of dignity and rights but equal (on average) in terms of wealth, representation in positions of power and so on.

among people of racial groups subject to that racism and that to fail to carry out this redistribution is racist.<sup>4</sup> *See below for more on the topics of colour-blindness and addressing racial disadvantage.*

The last contentious idea in relation to racism that we will consider in this section is an assumption rather than a claim. It is the assumption that 'racial inequality equals racism'. To be more precise, it is the assumption that racism explains all differences between racial groups in terms of health, educational achievement, professional achievement, income, welfare dependency, rates of criminal offending and other 'social indicators'. Racism may indeed explain some of the disparity, but other factors (such as cultural emphasis on things like education, hard work, economic success and a good reputation) can also be implicated in a racial group's relative disadvantage (or advantage).

### ***Internalised racism***

People who believe the lie that their race makes them inferior are often described as having 'internalised racism'. Believing the negative stereotypes about people of their race (eg that they are of bad character, of inferior intelligence or physically unattractive) undermines their self-confidence, saps their motivation and lowers their expectations of themselves. It sets them up to grow into the negative stereotypes.

### ***Colour-blindness and race-consciousness***

Many people who have experienced racial prejudice hope that a time will come when their race is no longer an issue.<sup>5</sup> But some say that as long as racial injustice persists, deliberately making an issue of their race is the most effective way of drawing attention to it. In their view, being race-neutral or 'colourblind', ie seeing race as irrelevant, will only become acceptable when racial injustice itself is no longer an issue. They say well-meaning people who act as if race is irrelevant before racial equality is achieved play into the hands of those who deny racism is a problem.

Some people go further than 'making an issue of their race' to declaring their 'pride' in it. Declarations of racial pride are typically a defiant response to racial denigration. They are also designed to inoculate vulnerable members against internalised racism. The intended message is, 'We are not innately inferior; we are innately equal!'. Unfortunately, well intentioned though such declarations may be, they have a tendency to provoke insecure or combative people of the dominant race to issue their own declarations of racial pride. Instead of suppressing racism, these declarations can perpetuate and inflame it.

Almost certainly the pride being declared is less in race (ie in distinctive physical features like skin and eye colour and hair texture) and more in things like cherished customs and traditions and group solidarity and resilience in the face of adversity. Nonetheless, it is not clear that declaring pride in ethnicity or culture would be less provocative than declaring pride in race.

If people in a multiracial society want to eventually reach a point when race is no longer an issue, they almost certainly will not get there by identifying themselves first and foremost by their race or cultural

---

<sup>4</sup> This claim lowers the threshold for labelling a person as racist. If a person from the 'oppressor group' is not actively taking action to reverse racial inequality, he or she is said to be racist. Silence or inactivity on racism is taken as evidence of racism. Christians will recognise this as an example of a sin of omission, of failing to say and do what they could do to raise awareness of injustice and rectify it.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King famously expressed this hope in his 'I have a dream' speech, saying, 'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character'.

background and by supporting segregated spaces and events for people of different racial and cultural groups. A constant focus on diversity would appear to work against unity rather than towards it.

### ***Unconscious prejudice or bias***

Children naturally take on the attitudes of their parents and other influential people in their lives, including prejudicial attitudes towards people of other races. They may not even be conscious that they hold these prejudices until someone makes them aware of them.<sup>6</sup> Becoming aware that one holds certain prejudices can be a discomfiting experience. Ideally people will be made aware of their unconscious prejudice in ways that avoid defensiveness and denial but rather in ways that encourage them to acknowledge the wrongfulness of their attitudes and the harms they cause and commit to changing them.

### ***Addressing racial disadvantage***

It is now widely recognised that racism can lead to members of oppressed racial groups becoming (on average) poorer, sicker, angrier and unhappier than members of non-oppressed groups.<sup>7</sup>

Governments that acknowledge the existence of racism and its harmful effects introduce anti-discrimination laws. Anti-discrimination laws require institutions (eg schools, workplaces, healthcare settings, police and legal systems) to treat people of all races equally.<sup>8</sup> Fines or even prison terms can be given to lawbreakers. Over time, it is hoped that anti-discrimination laws will help change citizens' attitudes to racism and that they will shape them to believe that racism is morally unacceptable. It is also hoped that anti-discrimination laws will help racial minorities to improve their position relative to people in the majority group in spheres of life such as health, education, employment, income, home ownership and compliance with the law.

If racial disadvantage is entrenched, anti-discrimination laws alone may not be sufficient to reverse it, however.<sup>9</sup> In this situation, positive discrimination (also called 'affirmative action') of some sort is often introduced to 'close the gaps'. Positive discrimination typically takes the form of quotas, benefits, subsidies or concessions exclusively for people of the target group, which will remain in place until equality is sufficiently achieved. Table 1 below contains arguments in support of positive discrimination and some of the concerns it raises.

---

<sup>6</sup> Unconscious prejudice or bias is also a feature of ethnocentrism. Many people who grow up in a monocultural environment unconsciously take on the view that their culture is natural, normal and right and that cultural beliefs and practices that differ from their own are 'wrong' or inferior.

<sup>7</sup> It can, and often does, but not always. Consider, for example, the remarkable success of people of Jewish and Chinese heritage in many countries in the face of anti-Jewish and anti-Chinese racism. What explains their resilience?

<sup>8</sup> Some race-based discrimination is seen as justified, eg ethnic restaurants can selectively employ staff of the relevant ethnicity, and Aboriginal organisations can selectively employ Aboriginal people.

<sup>9</sup> Arguments over the causes of entrenched disadvantage typically pit people who blame it on current and historical racism against people who blame the disadvantaged for 'making poor choices' and 'well-intentioned assistance programs that produce passivity and victimhood'. Unfortunately, both groups tend to resist accepting that there is truth in the other's argument.

Table 1: Positive discrimination to address racial disadvantage

<b>Arguments in support of positive discrimination to address racial disadvantage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We can't even up the playing field without it.</li> <li>• Favourable treatment now cannot undo or rectify past unfavourable treatment that left a legacy of present-day disadvantage, but it does make up in some way for it.</li> <li>• Positive discrimination makes educational and workplace settings more reflective of the racial diversity of society in general.<sup>10</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Concerns about positive discrimination to address racial disadvantage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerns about fairness: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ It doesn't resolve injustice. It just changes the group that is unjustly treated. Where opportunities are limited, they should be awarded on the basis of <i>merit</i>, not race.<sup>11</sup> Assistance should be rendered on the basis of <i>need</i>, not race.</li> <li>◦ The descendants of historical wrongdoers should not be required to pay for their ancestors' wrongdoing.<sup>12</sup></li> <li>◦ Are recipients of assistance truly entitled to it? Are they genuine members of the target group, and are they genuinely disadvantaged?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Concerns about the effect on recipients' self-conception and effort: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Affirming the idea that people are disadvantaged, oppressed and victimised incentivises them to behave as such, eg as passive, helpless and dependent on others. How do we avoid undermining their will to better themselves through their own efforts?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Concerns about program design and duration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ How do we design an assistance program that is resistant to corruption, won't backfire, won't cause resentment, is guaranteed to succeed, and that everyone agrees on how and when to phase it out?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> Racial diversity in itself adds nothing of value to educational or workplace settings apart from making the people in those settings visually more diverse. Having a diversity of *cultural backgrounds* or *worldviews* represented in the workplace is more significant. It comes with upsides (such as more ideas) as well as downsides (such as greater likelihood of miscommunication, disagreement and conflict).

<sup>11</sup> It is often also added that we set up people to fail if we put them into academic courses or jobs that are beyond their abilities and that they are more likely to be resented by peers who have gotten in 'by merit'. The failure rate could be minimised by selecting people with the greatest potential. Resentful peers might be invited to reflect on how much they earned their place through their own efforts or through advantages they had (such as wealthy parents, tutoring and high-quality schooling) that the beneficiaries of assistance lacked.

<sup>12</sup> If you find this argument persuasive, then consider this question: Are people who now enjoy advantages wrongly acquired through the racism of their forefathers entitled to continue to benefit from those advantages and to pass them on to their children?

## **Attempts to eradicate racism**

All racism is hurtful and harmful. None should be dismissed as trivial. The most cruel and violent forms shock and sicken us. But constant exposure to what we might call 'covert' or 'subtle' racism can also be soul-destroying and lead to poor health and premature death.

When a society succeeds in suppressing the most obvious and appalling forms of racism, attention may turn to suppressing less obvious forms. Ideally, this is done in ways that keep people on side. Anti-racism campaigners risk losing support if in their zeal to achieve the unattainable goal of eradicating racism, they punish people for actions that are innocent and not meant to be offensive or malicious.

Australia's legal system operates in accordance with the principle that it is better to acquit a guilty person than to convict an innocent person. That principle implies that if there is reasonable doubt about whether an action was motivated by racial animosity, the actor should get the benefit of the doubt.

## **A Christian perspective on racism**

After sin entered the world and the number of humans grew, they began to see each other as competitors and as potential threats. Most began to regard only the people in their in-group – their clan or tribe – as human. They regarded outsiders as less than fully human – if indeed they were human at all. The moral thing to do was to serve the interests of the clan. If it served the interests of the clan to treat outsiders well (eg because they were powerful or because trading with them brought benefits), it was right to treat them well. But if it served the interests of the clan to kill outsiders or enslave them and take over their property (eg because they became weak and vulnerable), that would also be right. Outsiders had no value in and of themselves as persons; their value lay only in what the clan could get from them.

We might like to think we are modern people who have left tribal thinking behind. We might like to think our commitment to universal human rights is deep and unshakable. But our tribal instincts are deeply rooted, and Satan is keen to take advantage of them. He wants to keep us divided and suspicious towards each other, and he wants us to selfishly use each other for our own ends. Racism is one of the tools he uses to achieve these goals. He is especially keen to infect Christian families and communities with racist attitudes.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Christians in many times and places have held racist beliefs and put them into practice. For example, during white settlement in Australia, many Christians ignored injustices against Aboriginal peoples by asserting that they were less than fully human. White missionaries to Aboriginal peoples countered this prejudice by insisting that Aboriginal people were of 'one blood' with other humans (citing Acts 17:26), yet revealed their ethnocentricity by equating being a 'proper Christian' with adopting European ways.

Christians have used Scripture to justify their racism. For example, white Christians in America defended African slavery by:

- interpreting Genesis 9:20–27 to mean that God had ordained African races (said to be the descendants of Noah's son Ham) to live as slaves under the Semitic and white races (said to be the descendants of Noah's other two sons Shem and Japheth)
- appealing to slave ownership among great men in Israel's history
- claiming that the third and tenth commandments sanctioned slavery
- inferring that the apostle Paul's acceptance of slavery constituted endorsement.

*Footnote continues on next page*

Jesus encourages us to overcome our tribal instincts, to recognise the full humanity of people of every colour and creed and to treat them as we would treat ourselves or members of our own family. Within the Christian community, we are to see Christians of every race as fellow adoptees in God's family and as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The following biblical teachings are the foundations for a Christian response to racism:

- All people are (equally) created by God in his own image (Genesis 1:27); human dignity is, therefore, God-given, not dependent on race or other attributes.
- God loves all people equally; he does not show favouritism (Matthew 5:45; Romans 2:11).
- All people have a common ancestry; we are people of one blood (Acts 17:26).
- All people are equally born with a capacity for good and a capacity for evil; none is uniquely virtuous; we are all corrupted by sin (Romans 3:9,10).
- God confused the languages of the people of Babel and dispersed them because of their sin of pride, not because he favoured racial segregation. Now God calls his people, the church, to model unity by demonstrating Jesus' humble and generous love (eg Ephesians 4:1–3).
- Racism grounds human identity and security in one's race rather than God. Pride in race can become a form of idolatry, a violation of the first commandment (Exodus 20:3).
- In becoming a man, Jesus identified himself with all people, not just his own people, the Jews (eg John 3:16).
- Jesus died and rose again for *all* people; God's plan of salvation is for people of every race, language and culture (eg Matthew 28:19; John 3:16; Acts 2:21; Acts 10:34,35; Romans 10:12; Revelation 7:9).
- The neighbours we are called to love are not just people of our in-group, but strangers, including people in need and people treated unjustly (eg Matthew 25:31–46; Luke 10:25–37), people who treat us unjustly (eg Luke 6:28,29) and people we are accustomed to seeing as our enemies (eg the Old Testament book of Jonah; Matthew 5:43–48).
- In the world to come, God will put right earthly injustices. Some of those that are now first will be last, and some of those who are now last will be first (eg Matthew 19:30, 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30).

The right thing for Christians to do is to acknowledge racism where it exists and defend people targeted by it. However, Christians will be wary of utopian schemes that bypass fair process in their drive to eliminate racism.

## Deciding how I will act

When Christians think about how they might act according to God's will in a given situation, they often ask, 'What would Jesus do?' An equally suitable but easier-to-answer question is, 'What actions on my part would likely please God (or Jesus) in this situation?' We might come up with a variety of God-pleasing actions by focusing on virtues that are consistent with Jesus' life and teaching and with Christian teaching

---

*Continued*

And white Christians from the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa defended apartheid by citing the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–10) and Acts 17:26, claiming that these passages show that God ordained the separation of the races.

We now regard interpretations of Scripture like these, which justify racial hierarchies, prejudice and segregation, as selective and self-serving and as contrary to true Christianity. We consider them heresies because they are in conflict with the life and teachings of Jesus and with God's will as revealed in the Bible more generally.



more generally, such as Paul's teaching on the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22,23. Consider the scenarios in the table below and the suggested virtues we might focus on.

Scenario	Virtues
1. You are targeted by racism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ability to accurately identify an incident as racist</li> <li>• The wisdom to discern the right response in the situation at hand, eg self-control and gracious forbearance or a polite but firm challenge</li> </ul>
2. You witness racism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The ability to accurately identify an incident as racist</li> <li>• The courage to take action</li> <li>• The wisdom to discern what sort of helpful Christian actions you might take in the situation at hand</li> </ul>
3. You are accused of racism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The self-control to not automatically respond with defensiveness or denial</li> <li>• The ability to honestly weigh up the truth of the accusation</li> <li>• The honesty and humility to admit our wrongdoing where we have done wrong and to repent of it, and a desire to make amends and reconcile with the person we have wronged</li> <li>• The grace to respond with forbearance, self-control, generosity of spirit where an accusation is misconceived</li> <li>• The strength to put aside thoughts of revenge and to forgive where an accusation is malicious</li> </ul>
4. Your organisation is accused of racism.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The discipline to not automatically respond with defensiveness or denial</li> <li>• The ability to honestly weigh up the truth of the accusation</li> <li>• The commitment to making the organisation fairer where the accusation is well founded</li> </ul>

## Reviewing my actions

If you take action in response to racism, reflect on it later. Ask yourself these questions:

- Was your action consistent with Jesus' life and teaching and with Christian virtue?
- Was it as good as you could do in the circumstances, or might you have achieved a better outcome by acting differently, especially if you could have achieved a better outcome at little or no extra cost to yourself?

## Additional resources

### *From churches*

Lutheran Church of Australia 1997, *We're All People*, <https://www.rap.lca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/26/2020/05/1997-WereAllPeople.pdf>

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod 1994, *Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry*, <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=2ZSjBpgjY39Eo1IH1vqCgl79YUGmfrve>

National Council of Churches of Australia 2003, *Subverting Racism*, [https://www.ncca.org.au/files/Departments/Social\\_Justice/SJS03fullkit.pdf](https://www.ncca.org.au/files/Departments/Social_Justice/SJS03fullkit.pdf)

### *Secular*

UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/cerd.pdf>

Australian Human Rights Commission, *Let's talk racism conversation guide*, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/lets-talk-race-guide-how-conduct-conversations-about>