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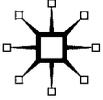
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CONSTRUCTING SOLIDARITY FOR A
LIBERATIVE ETHIC
ANTI-RACISM, ACTION, AND JUSTICE

Tammerie Day

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Dedicated to all those who struggle for justice
and
with gratitude to my family

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SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Content and Context in Theological Ethics, as a new series in the Palgrave Macmillan titles in religion, offers a fresh look at the millennia-old tradition of ethics engaging religions, their scriptures and revered texts, and their theological reflections on what matters and why. The series is first and foremost focused on ethics, done from theological and religious perspectives, and rooted in the particular contexts and lived experience of real people in history, in the present, and hoped for in the future. While engaged by diverse contexts, themes emerging in the series span the gamut of research in ethics that provoke theological and/or religious concerns; for example as this text demonstrates, theo-ethical reflection on and action in the struggle for liberation by people of color in collaboration with white folks to understand the theological and ethical underpinnings and material implications of whiteness and white privilege, in order to work as more effective allies in addressing structural racism and liberation from the oppressive aspects of the structures that enshrine difference. As contemporary work in ethics is increasingly context driven and characterized by diversity, this series brings contextual theological and religious ethics to bear on the content explored.

Constructing Solidarity for a Liberative Ethic: Anti-Racism, Action, and Justice by Tammerie Day brings insight and a practical plan from the perspective of white solidarity in the work to undo racist oppression and dismantle white privilege. When the full expression of humanity is constrained by oppressive forces—such as the experience of people of color, women, people in poverty, and gayfolk among others—humanity is called to liberative action for those who are oppressed and for the oppressor: both conditions pervert humanity and are in need of redress. The call for an anti-racist ethics of liberation requires: disengaging oppressive behaviors; working collaboratively to dismantle unjust systems; and rejecting thoughts of oneself as better/superior or less/inferior than another. Day walks with her readers through a detailed analysis of the concrete/context-laden lived experience of the people the traditions claim as their own and critical

reflection on what was the past for them as oppressor or oppressed and what could be a liberative future. The series provides scholars and activists alike works of interest on a broad range of subjects in ethics identified with a particular community whose voice and experience is underrepresented in ethics, theology, religious studies, and related disciplines.

I am privileged (in a non-oppressive way) to include in the series' first year of publication this text with its focus on a system that has inflicted the injustice of racism so thoroughly on a people that some folks are quite unaware of their privilege while many others struggle under the mantle of oppression. White power and privilege is historic, endemic, and so thoroughly institutionalized in the United States that it goes often unnamed and unchallenged—it's just the way things are and always have been. With *Constructing Solidarity*, Day names racism as oppression and issues the challenge to her readers with a resource to ethically confront and address the divide between privileged and conscientized worldviews, in order to materially transform oppressive realities at home, school, office, market, and church.

Readers, welcome to the series and . . . enjoy!

PREFACE

White people often don't want to hear from a white person about race; but I believe white people have a responsibility to talk to each other about and do something about the damage racial injustice has done and is doing. Before getting into the theological and ethical work of this project, I want to speak particularly to white readers, one white person to another.

You might remember when you first felt white, even if you didn't have language for it at the time. That moment came for me when I was ten, the day my father—a farmer in South Texas—told me that I could no longer play with my friends from up the road, the children of our farm's foreman. These were our closest neighbors in a place with more fields than people.

"Why?" I asked, unaware of having done anything to get in trouble lately.

"Because," he said, looking uncomfortable and sounding irritable, "it just doesn't look good." At my confused silence, he went on. "It looks good for Mexican kids to be playing with an Anglo girl, but it just doesn't look good for you." With that, the conversation was over, and so were the friendships with Carlos and Idolina, except for furtive hellos on the school bus we all rode together.

My father was representative of many white people in South Texas: prejudiced against Mexicans and Mexican Americans as a group; dismissive of and resistant to their attempts to gain social and political power; and, yes, the benign exploiter and charitable *patrón* of the men and women who worked for him. One of these was Julia Bravo, a single woman in her 40s, born in the United States of immigrant parents. Julia was my father's housekeeper in his bachelor years, and stayed on to help after my parents' marriage, through their early child-rearing years. With Julia as my primary caregiver, and Carlos and Idolina as playmates, I grew up surrounded by Mexican American people, with a child's love and acceptance for the people around me. I was aware that we had a bigger house and more nice things than these neighbors, but the way things were was just the way things were.

With my father's words, a crack opened in the foundation of these assumptions. I felt that he was wrong, and I didn't know what to do with the feeling. The affection I felt for and the security I felt with Julia, Idolina, and Carlos had been revealed as false and rendered untenable.

I'd like to say I was a brave and wise child who found a way to bridge the gulf my father's statement revealed. I wasn't, as this second story shows.

A few months after this conversation with my father, I was about to begin a new class in ballet; at ten, I had reached the age where students often began to learn to dance on point. I was excited when my mother brought home pink satin point shoes, with long grosgrain ribbons. My mother said there would be a session where we'd learn how to attach the ribbons.

I couldn't wait. With Julia around, I didn't think I had to. I asked her to sew the ribbons on for me. She refused, knowing better. I said words I'll never forget. Pulling race and class rank, I said, "You have to. You're the maid." I'll never forget the look on her face, either. She silently sewed the ribbons on, and just as silently stood by when my mother discovered what I'd done, and chewed me out for disobedience to her and disrespect to Julia.

I was clearly in the wrong . . . a wrong I had been murkily but effectively taught. "As a white person, you are better than the brown-skinned people around you. As the child of the employer, you are a higher class. But you play those cards silently. You don't trump out loud." I was learning to be one of those white people who heard without hearing; saw without seeing; knew without knowing.

The minefield of race, power, and privilege continued to always be underfoot, as I followed the trajectory laid out for middle-class white women: college, career, marriage, and family. Each step of this trajectory further whitened my life, although this was not something I was aware of at the time. Despite occasional contacts with African American and Latino/a people, I lived in a whitened world, peopled with folks I met through jobs with good companies, buying a house in a good neighborhood in a suburb with good schools. White folks. White companies. Mostly white neighborhood. I did begin to wonder what it meant that "white" and "good" had come together so pervasively in my life. I was afraid to really think about it and it was easy not to, most of the time. Every now and then, a person I would meet (the one black person in the professional ranks of the consulting firm I worked for) or a news story in the media (O. J. Simpson's trial for murder) punctured the pervasive whiteness, and brought back

truths I knew from childhood: separation and what I increasingly saw as injustice based on skin color was unnecessary, unnatural . . . and unChristian.

* * *

Maybe our paths cross, here, at the corner of “cognitive dissonance” and “now what?”. What do we do with the perception that things are not as they should be? When it comes to feelings and thoughts arising from issues having to do with race, too often our response as white people is to turn away, out of fear, guilt, shame, or a sense that the problem is too intractable to solve.

Where I started was full of fear because of what I had been taught and what I did not know. That’s true for most of us: we have not decided for ourselves what it means to be white. We may accept or reject the messages our society sends us about being white, but we may not have reflected on the implications of being white for our hearts, minds, bodies, souls. We may not know the history of how we became white or what whiteness has cost us or what it has cost the people we define as not-white.

Imagine for a moment that you overhear one of your friends describing you to someone who does not know you. They mention—among other descriptors—that you are white. Play this scenario out in your head. How do you feel? Some of us would feel uncomfortable, maybe just because it is a rare occurrence or because it seems to be a limiting or inaccurate description or because it feels like being identified as part of the problem, whatever the problem is. Let’s turn toward that discomfort and learn from it; I think we can learn about a few realities, and a few misconceptions. First, the realities:

One, being called white feels ominously close to being called “white supremacist,” and we don’t want to be that. Most of us white people think of a “white supremacist” as someone who has an overt, public belief that white people *are* better in every way, and that society *should* be organized for the benefit of white people. Persons with white-supremacist beliefs tend also to hold openly prejudicial attitudes about people who are not white. Most of us want to separate ourselves from white supremacy, and we should; overt racism, and the deliberate privileging of whites, has no place in our society or in a Christian context. But we need to be careful that we don’t just scapegoat white supremacists by saying “We’re not *that*,” without thinking critically about who we *are* as white people. We need to consider what it means to live in a society that treats whiteness as the norm, with such wide-ranging effects that some describe the United

States as having a white-supremacist culture.¹ We need to work on our vocabulary for talking about being white, so that we can do the work of discerning what it means to be white, and understand how being white shapes our faith and faithfulness.

Two, another reason we are uncomfortable talking about being white is that we suspect there *are* in fact problems with being white. We are right. Without getting into a detailed analysis (we'll do this in a later chapter), we can acknowledge some facts. Throughout US history, some white people—mostly males with relative economic privilege, many of them Christians claiming biblical justification—used legal and illegal means to profit from the exploitation, enslavement, expulsion, or execution of men, women, and children of color: people indigenous to North America or imported from Africa, Central, and South America, the Caribbean, China, and Japan. The wealth generated by those means was passed down through white family and corporate structures, and is the reason why white people as a class have greater net assets than people of color today.

Are all white people wealthier and more privileged than any given community of color? No, of course not. Being white is not monolithic: other aspects of your identity—economic standing, gender, class, sexual orientation, citizenship, age—can affect your access to race privilege. Still, in the present day, many of us who are white benefit from living in a society where white skin makes our lives easier and can increase our economic well-being. Forty years after the passage of civil rights legislation, the continuing preponderance of white people in positions with high societal power and economic reward is stunning. It is also one sign of white privilege, a historically constructed, present-day reality that we don't want to see or acknowledge. Our desire not to see this reality is one of the reasons we are uncomfortable being called "white." We are not comfortable with the word "privilege," either; those of us who are female or gay or poor or older may feel more oppressed than privileged. We not only need a better vocabulary for talking about being white, we also need a more critical and nuanced understanding of what we are talking about.

Three, if the conversation has to do with being a Christian, being white doesn't usually enter the picture. This is one thing white evangelical, progressive, conservative, and even emergent Christians have in common: we tend to gather and worship in predominantly white congregations, oriented toward the needs of our predominantly white communities and members. The number of multiracial congregations is quite small: 5 percent, by a recent estimate.² In any case, this book will not argue for multiracial

congregations as a panacea; white people often replicate unexamined white-privileging practices even in multiracial settings. Our challenge is to learn how this happens, and to learn the skills and practices of self-critical examination and transformation, individually and as communities. The good news is that white congregations don't have to become multiracial or multiethnic before beginning to work for racial justice. There is plenty of work for us to do—in fact, there is work we *need* to do—*before* we seek to enter into working relationships with people of color.

When we white Christians turn aside from critical discernment about what it means to be white, and ignore the call to work for racial justice, we are turning aside from the most fundamental tenets of our faith: the commandments to love God, and our neighbors as ourselves. Our failure to love in ways that produce racial justice represents, as James Cone put it, the “original sin” of the church.³ Whether we describe ourselves as Christian or whether we are “spiritual but not religious” or whether we follow another spiritual path or no path at all, we are all vulnerable to racism’s warping effects. We need ways to see and break free of the harm racism does to us and through us.

Finally, there is the reality that many white Christians don’t feel we have an alternative between white supremacy (which we don’t want) and white privilege (which we disagree about: can we get rid of it? can we use it ethically?). We might be wondering, is there a way to be white that feels more right than wrong, even when looking at the world with a critical gaze? I believe there *is* a better alternative than don’t-mess-with-me white supremacy or bury-my-head-in-the-sand white complicity. This alternative is *white anti-racism*, which can be understood as a goal, a practice, a form of discipleship, an identity, even a way of life.

White anti-racism, as I have come to understand it, has two entwined components: learning to become free of racism’s warping effects on white people, and learning to become a strong ally to people of color as they seek their liberation. We will learn more about both of these twinned components as we go along, but here I want to note four important misconceptions it would help us to keep in mind:

1. **As white people, to the extent we think about racism, we may think about it as a problem that only affects people of color.** We may not be aware of the ways racism hurts and imprisons us as white people, and this is an important understanding for us to gain.
2. **White people tend not to be aware of ways being white create and maintain societal and economic privilege, and so we are**

missing at least half the impact of racism. People of color are often all too aware of white privilege, and this difference in knowing and understanding makes it hard to work together. We tend to dismiss white privilege as something other people might have—if we think it exists at all—without doing our homework to understand how we might be carrying it, too.

3. **White people tend to think that we have all the knowledge and none of the responsibility for racism.** After all, we are good people with good educations; we know how to solve problems and we want to help. We know racism is the result of choices people—not us—made long ago. Most of us need to *shift the balance of knowledge and responsibility*: to accept that we don't know everything we need to know about racism, and yet, paradoxically, that we need to be more responsible for addressing racism.
4. **White people tend to think we need to “fix” people of color, and racism will be ended.** The reality is that white people cannot solve the problems of or achieve liberation for people of color; that's *their* journey, and *their* work. At best, we can be allies to that work; but *only if we are doing our own work*. (Nor can people of color do our work for us, something we all too often expect them to do.) It is important to recognize that there is a great deal that white people can do to prepare for and begin work for racial justice *before* attempting more authentic relationships with people of color. This book shares some of the nature and tasks of that work, grounded in theological and ethical reflection on experience as well as biblical and other sources of knowing.

* * *

When we choose the alternative path of white anti-racism, the journey leads through difficulty, yes, but it is important that those of us on this journey also proclaim that—in addition to being the right thing to do—the road leads to wonder and joy, health and peace, and more just and loving relationships within ourselves, with our neighbors, with our enemies, and even with God. Too many white people never get far enough along to experience these real changes, and don't know it's possible. Where I sit is not perfect, but it is a whole lot better than where I used to be: ignorant, afraid, unconscious, ashamed, and not knowing how or where to move.

My experience now is of having more authentic relationships with people of many different ethnicities and social identities; an integrated, healthy, and open self-regard; and a relationship with God grounded in my essential belovedness, rather than the external statuses and

characteristics the world is looking for in me. I have had chances to make real amends in personal relationships, and concrete contributions toward structural change for achieving justice. This work not only is the right thing for Christians to be doing, it feels good and right—deeply so—in a way that the false comfort of unconscious whiteness never will.

This is hard and worthwhile work; we are learning to love, and companions can light the way and lighten the load, so my prayer is that people who share this passion find each other in the journey. May you be honest with each other and grace-full toward each other, as you work for justice as a sign and expression of love.

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