

Christian Privilege: Breaking a Sacred Taboo

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The author discusses the concept of privilege in terms of the benefits enjoyed by Whites and men (P. McIntosh, 1998). This article presents a new theoretical perspective focusing on religious privilege and includes a list of privileges that are enjoyed by members of the dominant religious group (i.e., Christians) in the United States.

El autor discute el concepto del privilegio en cuanto a los beneficios que disfrutaban los Blancos y los hombres (P. McIntosh, 1998). Este artículo presenta una nueva perspectiva teórica que enfoca al privilegio religioso e incluye una lista de privilegios que disfrutaban miembros del grupo religioso dominante de los Estados Unidos, los cristianos.

Jesus blessed me with his future, and I'll protect it with fire.

—Rage Against the Machine

Currently, diversity issues are prominent in the United States; however, when most people are talking about issues of diversity, they are really talking about racial issues. It is fairly rare to engage in a discussion of diversity issues in which other salient factors (e.g., religion, sexual orientation, age, ability status) are the focus. For example, the overwhelming focus of multicultural counseling theory (e.g., Helms, 1984, 1995; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995; Ponterotto, Fuertes, & Chen, 2000; Sue, Ivey, & Pedersen, 1996) and of empirical research (e.g., Hansen, 2000; Ruelas, Atkinson, & Ramos-Sanchez, 1998; Sadowsky, Kuo-Jackson, Richardson, & Corey, 1998) has been on working with clients from racial minority backgrounds (i.e., African American, Asian American, Hispanic/Latino[a], and Native American). Thus, although researchers have begun to deal with issues related to race, other aspects of living in a multicultural world, such as gender (Enns, 2000), sexual orientation (Fassinger, 2000), and religion (Langman, 1995; Worthington, 1989) remain largely unexamined.

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The current U.S. society might be construed as being overly concerned with political correctness; this zeitgeist demands the recognition of all oppressed groups when discussing aspects of diversity. Given this current cultural norm, one often finds a disclaimer at the beginning of an article on multiculturalism. For example, in "Models of Multicultural Counseling," Ponterotto et al. (2000) essentially stated that although they recognized the influence and importance of many factors (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, ability status), they were choosing to focus on issues of race. This is not to deny the importance of race and racism in multicultural development. In fact, the various types of oppression often interact, producing additive effects; being a member of multiple minority groups increases the likelihood and frequency of experiencing oppression and discrimination. Thus, it is not enough to suggest that similar problems exist in other areas (e.g., gender, religion, sexual orientation) that are being or have been discussed solely in terms of race. Rather, it is necessary to articulate and discuss the specific issues related to minority group membership (i.e., defined more broadly than race) in greater depth; if not, several essential components of people's experiences become lost.

In her article on White privilege, McIntosh (1998) discussed the subtle, yet powerful, ways that White people silently enjoy advantages in the United States. She suggested that this type of privilege operated in any situation when one group was in power and dominant. McIntosh's articulation about White privilege suggests the importance of examining the ways in which all dominant groups are privileged. In an attempt to further the work she put forth into understanding power and privilege in today's society, this article focuses on the privileges and advantages of being a Christian in the United States.

For the purposes of this article, a religious group is considered Christian if the members believe in (a) Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and (b) the teachings of the Old and New Testaments (e.g., belief in the Holy Trinity and the resurrection of Christ). In addition, Christian groups take communion and celebrate holidays connected with their religious beliefs (e.g., Easter, Christmas). Several groups meet these criteria, including Catholics, Protestants (e.g., Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians), Eastern Orthodox (e.g., Greek, Russian), and members of other, smaller denominations (e.g., Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists). This list is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, it is meant to be representative of the more common denominations of Christianity in the United States.

christian privilege

Christian privilege is something that came to my awareness as I began to understand the ways in which I myself am privileged. As a Caucasian male in today's society, I enjoy many invisible advantages (McIntosh, 1998). The ways

I enjoy privilege have helped and continue to help me in subtle, yet effective, ways. However, the ways in which I am privileged have also led to the neglect and denial of the part of me that experiences oppression; that part is my identification as a member of a minority religious group. By minority religious group, I am referring to non-Christian religious groups that are numerical minorities in the United States and that have experienced oppression and/or discrimination based on group membership (e.g., Buddhism, Hindism, Judaism, Islam).

Because the majority of Americans are Christian, Christianity is the dominant religion in the United States. Because of their numerical superiority and long-standing political positions, Christians have more power than all of the minority religious groups combined. Several examples from news headlines have illuminated this issue. First, people often hold discussions/debates concerning the separation of church and state; in fact, this idea was one of the founding principles of the United States. Inherent in a discussion of church and state is an ethnocentric assumption that either (a) church means the same thing for everybody or (b) church means something for everybody (i.e., religious minorities do not refer to their place of worship as a church). A more inclusive and appropriate term would be to discuss the separation of religion and state or religion and government.

Another example was Vice President Albert Gore's selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman (an Orthodox Jewish person) as his running mate in the 2002 presidential election. Rather than focusing on his credentials, members of the media largely concerned themselves with Senator Lieberman's ethnicity as an Orthodox Jew. The reason for this was that Mr. Lieberman is different from all of the previous vice presidential candidates in one obvious way: He is a Jew. Although it was an accomplishment to have a member of a religious minority selected for such a potentially important position, it is not without its detriments. Specifically, there was a resurgence of anti-Semitic sentiment and jokes as a result of this choice. Also, George W. Bush, at that time governor of Texas, proclaimed June 10, 2000, "Jesus Day." Although this act again raised the separation of religion and government issue, it also highlighted something far more frightening for people from minority religious backgrounds: placing the power of the nation in the hands of an ethnocentric man whose actions indicated a complete disregard for religious minorities.

As the dominant group, Christians enjoy a variety of privileges, much like Whites and men do in the United States (McIntosh, 1998). Significant numbers of people from non-Christian religious backgrounds live and work in U.S. society and have the experience of being a minority in terms of their religious group identification. It is important to note, however, that certain denominations of Christianity (e.g., Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists) do not seem to enjoy the same privileges as their counterparts from larger Christian groups. This is likely because some of the larger Christian groups do not view these smaller denominations as Christian (i.e., these

denominations are seen as cults), even though these denominations self-identify as Christian. In addition, negative stereotypes about these smaller denominations contribute to members of these groups feeling like an oppressed minority. Being a numerical minority also translates into these smaller denominations having very little power in U.S. society. Despite these reasons, members of these smaller denominations still enjoy certain advantages as members of the Christian religion.

I believe that discussing Christian privilege is "breaking a sacred taboo," because both subtle and obvious pressures exist to ensure that these privileges continue to be in the sole domain of Christians. This process is quite similar to the way in which Whites and men continue to (consciously and unconsciously) ensure the privilege of their racial and gender groups (McIntosh, 1998). Experiences of racism, sexism, and heterosexism each contribute to the oppression of and discrimination against persons from minority racial, gender, and sexual orientation groups, respectively. In a similar fashion, Christian religious dogmatism contributes to persons from minority religious groups feeling that their religious identity is not valued, and, subsequently, they feel discrimination and oppression because of their religious group membership.

One possible explanation for the existence of Christian privilege is the notion of a "nonconscious ideology" (Bem & Bem, 1970, p. 89). Bem and Bem first defined the concept of a nonconscious ideology to describe how implicit beliefs and attitudes are used to maintain the status quo in terms of gender inequality. They used the analogy of a fish and its environment to illustrate their concept of nonconscious ideology. A fish does not know its environment is wet, because that is all it knows and all it has ever experienced. The fish has no idea that anything else exists besides water because it has never had to think about any other possibilities. It has been discussed that Whites may not think of themselves as having a race (Helms, 1992); this occurrence is likely because Whites have been and continue to be the dominant group in the United States. White people do not interpret their environment as racially hostile, threatening, or discriminating because they have never been forced to examine the environment from the perspective of a person of color. In a similar fashion, Christians are not likely to know (or believe) that the environment is oppressive because that environment has never been oppressive to them for being Christian. Thus, Christian privilege is likely to be a result of Christianity being the nonconscious ideology (in terms of religious group membership) of the United States. Even if this is a valid explanation for the existence of Christian privilege, because Christians are the dominant religious group in the United States, it is their responsibility to recognize their power and the accompanying privileges.

Anecdotally, I have observed race to be a demographic factor that is asked on most educational and psychological research surveys. However, religious

group identification is rarely asked; if it is asked, typically there is a “no preference” or “I prefer not to answer” category. This presents an interesting question: Why are individuals so unwilling to explore religious issues? In general, researchers ask about race because they are interested in the genetic, environmental, political, psychological, and socioeconomic considerations and stereotypes that accompany each racial category. Researchers’ interest in religion as a demographic variable of interest should be for similar reasons. Fouad and Brown (2000) defined the term *ethnic group* by stating that it “refers to a group of people who live, or once lived, in close proximity to one another and, as a consequence, share ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving learning from similar life circumstances shared over generations” (p. 381). Using this definition, religious group membership clearly fits into Fouad and Brown’s conception of ethnic group. Thus, I argue that religion should be viewed as an ethnic group and that religious group membership should receive attention as an important variable in research. Learning more about both minority and majority religious groups will enrich society’s (U.S.) understanding of people’s experiences, in a fashion similar to how researchers have examined racial and gender group differences.

I believe the time has come to break the sacred taboo. Following is a beginning list of the privileges (some of which were adapted from McIntosh, 1998) that may be enjoyed by people from Christian religions.

a beginning list of christian privileges

1. I can be sure to hear music on the radio and watch specials on television that celebrate the holidays of my religion.
2. I can be sure that my holy day (Sunday) is taken into account when states pass laws (e.g., the sale of liquor) and when retail stores decide their hours (e.g., on Saturdays, they are open about 12 hours; on Sundays, they are closed or open for only a few hours).
3. I can assume that I will not have to work or go to school on my significant religious holidays.
4. I can be financially successful and not have people attribute that to the greed of my religious group.
5. I can be sure that when told about the history of civilization, I am shown people of my religion who made it what it is.
6. I do not need to educate my children to be aware of religious persecution for their own daily physical and emotional protection.
7. I can write an article about Christian privilege without putting my own religion on trial.
8. My religious group gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other religions.

9. I do not need to worry about the ramifications of disclosing my religious identity to others.
10. I can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of my religion.
11. I can worry about religious privilege without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
12. I can be sure that when my children make holiday crafts, they will bring home artistic symbols of the Christian religion (e.g., Easter bunny, Christmas tree).
13. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my religious group.
14. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my religion most of the time.
15. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a "credit to my religion" or being singled out as being different from other members of my religious group.
16. I can, if I wish to identify myself, safely identify as Christian without fear of repercussions or prejudice because of my religious identity.
17. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence and importance of the Christian religion.
18. I can protect my children from people who are religiously different from them.
19. I can have a "Jesus is Lord" bumper sticker or Ichthys (Christian fish) on my car and not worry about someone vandalizing my car because of it.
20. I can buy foods (e.g., in grocery store, at restaurants) that fall within the scope of the rules of my religious group.
21. I can travel and be sure to find a comparable place of worship when away from my home community.
22. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my religion will not work against me.
23. I can be sure when I hear someone in the media talking about g-d that they are talking about my (the Christian) g-d.
24. I can be fairly sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge," I will be facing a person of my religion.
25. I can be sure that people are knowledgeable about the holidays in my religion and will greet me with the appropriate holiday greeting (e.g., Merry Christmas).
26. I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of other religious groups without feeling any penalty for such a lack of interest and/or knowledge.
27. I can display a Christmas tree and/or hang holly leaves in my home without worrying about my home being vandalized because of my religious identification.
28. I can be fairly sure that some hate group does not exist whose goal is to eradicate my religious group from the planet.

conclusion

Although this list is by no means exhaustive, it is designed to begin a multicultural dialogue that consistently includes and incorporates religion. It is no longer a safe assumption that everyone is Christian. Rather, making that assumption is offensive to people from minority religious backgrounds, it contributes to ethnocentrism, and it decreases the amount of interaction among people from diverse backgrounds. It is hoped that more discussions focused on religious issues will make these issues far less taboo in U.S. society.

Future work should attempt to incorporate multiple aspects of privilege that coexist simultaneously. For example, the oppression that lesbian, gay male, bisexual male and female, and transgendered individuals experience might be somewhat explained by Christian privilege. Specifically, the encoding of Christian religious beliefs/doctrine into laws that brand homosexuality as immoral and subsequently illegal may be an example of Christian privilege. This is but one example; there are numerous ways in which various cultural diversity variables (e.g., religion, sexual orientation, gender, race, ability status, socioeconomic status) interact to contribute to privilege, oppression, and discrimination.

In line with recognizing the impact of multiple minority statuses, recent research (e.g., Miville et al., 1999) has focused on exploring the construct of universal-diverse orientation (UDO). As noted by Miville et al., UDO is characterized by an appreciation of the ways in which people are similar to one another as well as valuing the ways in which they are different. One important distinction to note is that UDO reflects a positive attitude toward diversity (i.e., appreciating and valuing differences), as opposed to just tolerance of people from diverse groups. Thus, applied to this article, it is not enough to be tolerant toward individuals from minority religious groups; rather, people from both Christian and non-Christian religious groups need to appreciate and value all religious diversity. In closing, it is important to note that all people (i.e., from both minority and dominant groups) must work in conjunction to eradicate privilege if we are to effectively form a multicultural world that truly appreciates diversity.

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