

# **The involvement of white people in the struggle against racism**

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I have been asked to speak about the contribution of white people to anti-racism in South Africa. I want to do this in four sections, indicating four moves that we as white people need to make, four thresholds we need to cross, four changes (or conversions) we need to undergo if we are to make a constructive contribution to the struggle against racism.

And let me clarify from the start that I say all this not as someone who claims to be above racism or free from racism, but as someone who has been challenged and helped over many years by black colleagues and friends to discover my own racism as well as the structural, power dimensions of racism; and invited by them, drawn by them, into our joint human struggle to overcome this scourge on humanity. To use a biblical image, I speak not like the proverbial Pharisee: "God, I thank you that I am not like those racists over there," but more like the tax collector, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

## **Farewell to innocence**

The first move we need to make is to say farewell to innocence. One of the basic obstacles to a constructive white engagement with racism is our well-known habit of saying: "It was actually not that bad," or, "We meant it well," or, "It happened before my time," or, "I was not involved." Such a denial of our involvement or complicity or of benefitting from racism, is a false innocence. Like Pontius Pilate washing his hands, such a protestation of innocence does not take away our complicity in racism.

We as white people, depending on how old we are, were involved in racism historically in various ways. We could have been open perpetrators, by voting for the NP or the CP or the HNP in whites-only elections; we could have called adult black people "boy" or "girl" (or worse racist terms); we could have paid black workers inhumanly low wages, or paid them with a "dop" of sweet wine to keep them "happy" and enslaved. We need to acknowledge as white people that racism in SA did not begin in 1948 when the NP came into power; it started in 1652 when the Dutch colonial officials waged occasional wars against the indigenous people of the Cape and brought slaves from Indonesia or India or Mozambique to these shores. And the destructive legacy of those wars and that slavery is with us to this day.

But even if we were not open perpetrators of racism, all of us whites benefited from the system of white privilege established in colonial times, which deliberately and systemically excluded black people. Most of us went to good schools and good hospitals, we lived in smart houses, with running water, electricity and water-borne sewage - while millions of black South Africans did not, and in many cases still do not. We need to own up to this glaring inequality and injustice, because it gave us privileges and advantages that our black compatriots did not have - and for decades could not have.

And so when I stood at that grave this morning I confessed to God my sin of complicity in the death of my 69 fellow human beings - and of thousands more who have died in this land due to racism. It was done in my name, even though I was only 10 years old at the time. And I am deeply ashamed of that. But I cannot confess that only to God; I also confess it to you as my fellow South Africans: with deep shame I accept co-responsibility for that crime, for that tragic massacre of people peacefully protesting against the insult of having to wear pass books, of being made foreigners in the land of their birth. I am deeply sorry that it happened.

We as white South Africans need to say farewell to innocence, to stop denying that we designed, carried out or benefitted from - and in many ways still benefit from - this destructive legacy of racism. By saying farewell to false innocence, we become vulnerable and open, not presuming or demanding to be forgiven, but adopting a position from where a new relationship can begin.

## **Farewell to ignorance**

The second move we need to make is to say farewell to ignorance. Often our claims of innocence are based on statements of ignorance: "We really did not know that this was happening," or, "Our leaders misled us," or, "Our newspapers did not tell us." That isn't a good excuse, but even if it may have been an excuse in the 1970s or 1980s, it is certainly not a valid excuse today, 22 years into democracy. All the material is available, there are volumes of TRC documents, the Karis/Carter collection, etc. We have no excuse today that we do not know what happened in our name, for the protection of white civilisation or in the fight against communism.

To be equipped to play a role in the struggle against racism, we need to inform ourselves thoroughly of what happened, so that we do not underestimate the depth of the pain and humiliation that black communities suffered or the economic damage it caused. But we must not only go and collect this knowledge from the books in the libraries. It is even more important to listen to one another's stories; to hear what happened to black people from their own mouths, in face to face encounters.

### **Farewell to arrogance**

Thirdly, and most fundamentally, I believe we need to say farewell to arrogance. The real problem with racism is that we white people arrogantly assume that we always know better, that our ways of thinking are more advanced, that our cultures are superior, that our languages are more sophisticated. And our false innocence and ignorance feed this arrogance, so that we can glibly tell black people to "get over it" or "move on" or "stop taking us back to the past". On this Human Rights Day, we are called to renounce our white arrogance and to affirm our shared human dignity, because as Archbishop Tutu kept on reminding us, our humanity is indivisible: I cannot be free unless you are free; I cannot be human unless you are human; we are human together - or we are not human.

### **YES to Africa**

But finally, brother and sisters, compatriots, we as white South Africans not only need to say farewell (or NO) to these racist assumptions and habits. We also need to say YES to a new way of life, YES to our fellow South Africans.

So farewell to innocence does not mean a sickly and paralysing guilt feeling; it is a genuine conversion that we need: to admit our guilt, to turn away from it, to leave it behind us, and to learn new habits. An important feature of these new habits will be to reverse the negative perceptions that most white people have of black men, especially young men. I am sure you have seen the bumper sticker, "A black man is always a suspect". The high levels of crime have driven many white people to automatically view every young black person as a potential criminal - which keeps feeding our racist prejudices, attitudes and actions. We need to find ways of being as careful as possible to avoid being robbed, mugged or hijacked, but without falling into the trap of suspecting every black youth we meet of criminal intentions.

Likewise, farewell to ignorance does not mean to become clever experts on SA history; it means to understand what happened and to hear the stories of pain, survival, courage and success from fellow South Africans and to start working together to make a different history together. So we need to commit our knowledge and experience to work with black colleagues as equal partners in overcoming the structural damage done by racism and in building communities and institutions beyond the exclusions and oppression of the past. And there is a huge amount of work to do together to build this country together.

Farewell to arrogance means to learn how to be silent, how to accept and respect black leadership, how to appreciate the wisdom inherent in African languages, cultures and religions. It will also mean losing our fear of one another, learning to speak African languages and identifying ourselves as Africans. I don't mean that we should arrogantly claim that we are Africans. I see myself as an African in all humility, on the basis of the invitation extended to me by leaders like our former presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, but also Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe of the PAC, who said: "Everybody who owes his loyalty to Africa and who is prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority we regard as an African." I accept that invitation, even though I know that there are people who would contest that. So I have to work hard and constructively together with my fellow Africans to give credibility to this humble claim.

To overcome racism in our own lives and communities demands all this from us, but it is not just all HARD WORK. In the first place, it is the normal life of people who love their neighbours as themselves. It is also a joyful homecoming and a surprising discovery of our common humanity. It is to enter into the riches and depth of African humanity.

I call on my fellow white South Africans to say farewell to false innocence, to say farewell to ignorance, and to say farewell to arrogance. I also call on all of us to say YES to being white Africans, committed constructively to work together in building this country that we love.