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It Is About Race | Andra Gillespie & Sumun Pendakur

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The Veritas Forum

As the wounds of racial injustice--old and new--continue to grip America, where can we find healing? At a Veritas Forum from Claremont, Andra Gillespie (Emory), and Sumun Pendakur (USC) discuss the intersection of race, faith, and reconciliation.

Transcript

Order cannot trump justice in a true moral paradigm. So my morality is strong, but my morality tells me this. Order cannot trump justice in a true moral paradigm, and so then makes me think about Jesus versus the Romans.

My conception, my understanding of what I've read about Jesus was that he was counter to the Romans who valued order over justice. As the wounds of racial injustice--both old and new--continue to grip America, where can we find healing? At a Veritas Forum from Claremont, Andra Gillespie, a political science professor at Emory University, and Sumun Pendakur, the chief learning officer and director of the USC Equity Institute. Sat down with Satya and Devadas, the chair of Applied Mathematics at the University of San Diego, to discuss the intersection of race, faith, and reconciliation.

Can you start with just giving us a brief sketch, sort of a mental deconstruction, whatever you think of your personal story, maybe as it relates to ethnicity? So first, can everybody hear me? Okay, great. So I have the theory. I'm a political scientist.

I'm not a developmental psychologist, but I have this theory that children of color in the United States become acutely aware of their race at about age four. I have a niece who is going to turn five next week, and so they're things she's done in the last year. They're kind of signaling to me that she's aware of the differences between her and her white classmates in particular.

And when I was her age, somehow I became very fascinated with Pocahontas. I'm from Virginia, so I'm from the East Coast, and I grew up about five miles away from where Pocahontas lived with John Roth. And somehow I heard that I had Native American

ancestry, and that became really fascinating to me.

I didn't know the history of Native Americans in the United States. I didn't know the history, sort of a oppression and extermination in the United States, so somehow I thought that that was different and perhaps better than what I did, because I announced one day that I was running away to China to become an Indian. Didn't quite understand how that works or how you run across the Pacific Ocean, but my mom thought that was really interesting.

And so I looked back and I reflect on that. I was becoming aware of race, and I was becoming aware of the fact that I was part of a cast group that was not necessarily high in the social hierarchy. And so the way that I internalized that was not necessarily the healthiest thing in the world.

And so as I grew up, I probably wanted to be more of an individual. There were certainly ways in which I felt a little different sometimes from my African-American classmates. I can't think of specific times when I may have been directly called an Oreo for being smart, but I certainly got that.

I was kind of ostracized for some of my Black peers as a result of wanting to do well in school. So I experienced that lots of people experience that. And so I found myself kind of detaching from race a lot through high school.

So if you talk to my friends in high school, if you talk to my friends, especially for the first part of college, I was very consciously diverse in the friends that I chosen by being diverse, and I didn't have a whole lot of Black friends. And the Black friends that I do have will tell stories about how they occasionally had to defend me in front of other African-American students. And I have much more wonderful relationships with all these people now, but it was definitely an interesting thing.

What changed for me was coming to college and being in an academic experience where I could study racial issues and study history. And as much as I wanted to be detached from it on a social level, I didn't want to be detached from it intellectually. So I was taking classes in African-American history.

I was taking classes in race and politics. And through those classes and through some of the interactions I lived in the multicultural house and college, and my classmates would challenge me to sort of rethink some of the things that I thought about race. And to not necessarily make it an abstraction, but to also think about the ways that this did affect my life, and I could either act like I was oblivious to the fact that there was racial difference in the United States, or I could learn something about it and then be proactive and do something about it.

So, you know, there was definitely this transformation that started to happen for me

probably about 19 or 20 years old. Yeah. So you see me kind of question? Absolutely.

Can you all hear me? Yeah. Okay, fantastic. So I'm the child of immigrants.

I'm some second gen. My parents came from Karnataka in South India back in 1969, and I was born in 1976, and grew up in right outside of Chicago. Any Midwesterners in the room? All right.

Okay. And so immediately I've told you something specific, right? So this kind of bicultural experience of having parents from India born and raised here. Also being Indian American right outside of Chicago, which is still largely black and white, and particularly when I was growing up there in the 80s and 90s, Evanston, it was fairly hyper segregated as a black and white town.

I grew up in North Evanston for the first few years, largely white grew up in South Evanston, largely black for the rest of grade school and middle school and high school. So very specific experience. And like many other Indian American kids, I was skinny and brown and had braces and glasses, so I was not cool by any stretch of the imagination.

But that sort of paradigm of being knowing from a very early age that I was different, that I was not black or white, having a really strong ethnic heritage as an Indian and an Indian American and specifically a black and white. I was a very African American and specifically ties to Karnataka, to South India, to my mother tongue, which is Canada. All those kinds of things were really important to me, but especially by middle school and high school, really coming to understand myself as the other, right? And what does the other mean, especially with the capital O, in dominant black and white paradigm? And those kinds of thoughts occupied me.

And in high school, I got involved also in cool things like advanced Spanish club and the young feminist club. Super awesome stuff. And my family also, we were low income for a number of years.

So all of these kinds of things were nexus points of my own identity as I was thinking about different similarity. And what does power look like, who has access to it? And a lot of transformation for me, particularly in college. And I think I was largely primed to explore college in a really specific way, because my father is, he's a political economist, he's a Marxist scholar.

And so having a framework from a very young age of looking at politics and economics and justice in really different kinds of ways, we grew up going to marches and rallies. And so in college, I got there, I was going to be pre-med. [laughter] And then after the first week, realized calculus and organic chemistry were not for me.

So then I was not pre-med after week one. But I was trying to figure myself out, like most people do in college, and that's where huge transformations occurred for me, because

this strong ethnic and race identity as other really became integrated with a broader Asian American framework. And I identified very strongly as an Asian American for all the political implications that it has.

In addition to all my other identities as a leftist and as a woman, as a feminist, as a mom, all those kinds of things. But I got involved in the struggle for Asian American studies. And that really defined me because this question of who owns knowledge and who owns the distribution of knowledge, who owns what we get to learn or study or teach or practice, those all became really, like you said, not just abstract, but very concrete questions for my entire college experience.

In addition, all the fun, awesome stuff, the hanging out, the four AM dorm conversations, right? So that was sort of a couple of brief transformations on my journey. Thank you so much. I know we're not doing justice at all, but giving us just a few minutes to get a snapshot of this thing, just to talk about something as complex as race.

I want to continue the tradition of injustice by giving you again just a few minutes to talk about faith. So maybe, Andrea, maybe you can start by saying something about, I know you're coming here thinking about the Christian faith from your perspective. Maybe you can talk about that and how it shaped you.

Yeah. And then it's just. Well, so I was raised by a Christian mother.

My mom grew up in the church. My grandmother was the church secretary. And, you know, my dad's out of the family.

My grandfather was a Deacon. My grandmother was also one of the church secretaries. But my mom didn't have a personal relationship with Christ until I was six months old.

So she'd went up in church. She'd seen all the rituals, but she hadn't internalized what that was supposed to mean. She hadn't accepted for herself that Christ had died for her sins and had been resurrected to restore her to a right relationship with himself.

And she had that revelation when I was about six months old. And so from there on, she took me to church and she taught me those precepts, but we believe that God doesn't have grandchildren. And so each individual has to make that decision for themselves.

So she helped me make that decision when I was a really small child. And I think with the understanding that a precocious little kid can make, I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior. You know, as time goes on, you get older.

You develop. You start to understand more. And so that's a commitment that I've reaffirmed over time.

And so as I got older, as I've understood more, there have been points in my life where

I've had to say, "Okay, I'm choosing this for myself and this is why I choose to continue to follow Christ." And so that's kind of where my faith story has come from. I'm assuming you're here tonight in the mindset or in the belief of an atheist and a secular humanist. So can you tell me sort of how you came to embrace that as your worldview? I'm the non-Christian tonight, y'all.

Hi. And I love the journey story you just shared. It's really beautiful.

I've always been an atheist. It wasn't like I went from believing to non-believing. My family in India is Hindu.

We're Vaishnavites, Vishnu worshipers. And I definitely am involved in Hindu cultural traditions. I enjoy it very, very much.

My dad's an atheist. My brother's an atheist. My mom is very much a humanist.

She believes in God. She does her prayers at her altar in the morning. But it was never really a moat.

There was never a tipping point for me. There just never was that belief. I've always loved our mythologies and our stories.

When I was little and my mom used to feed me and tell me stories about how the baby Lord Krishna was everywhere, I would look for him in the trees and things like that. So I think that became deeply a part of my fabric in terms of looking at the possibilities around us and the possibility for story and imagination. But that's what it has been for me.

One of the questions that they've posed for us too is, you know, have those beliefs shaped us a little bit. And I think my understanding of myself, right, I'm only speaking for myself. I'm not claiming to speak for all secular humanists or all atheists.

None of us can speak for anybody else. But for me, the root of my belief system is a root in compassion and love. And so I think that there's probably a lot of shared feelings around that, even up here, even regardless of our faith or non-faith traditions.

But a fundamental belief in those two that drive my look at the world, but also the strong belief that inequality is human made and therefore needs to be directly confronted. And then the third piece of that is that there's no issue that's not connected. We live fundamentally intersectional lives.

There is no single issue because we all live, leave, leave multiple issue lives. So that framework really guides the way I look at the world at my work, the way I'm trying to be in terms of partnership with my husband and with my child. What kind of family member I'm trying to be.

So it deeply informs me. Thank you. So right now the questions that we've asked have to do with personal struggles, your faith journey and how you view yourself in others in terms of race.

But you guys are both nerds. So there's also this other, thank you. There's all this other perspective that we want to take which is sort of a scholars and thinkers who've thought about race and activists who've kind of really struggled with this thing.

Maybe just to get us on the same page, can you possibly, maybe we'll talk about your definition of some of these words. So I wrote down things like race, ethnicity, racism, prejudice, privilege, any one or a few, whatever you think of framing from your scholarly perspective. Yeah, well, I think most of us, and I think we would both start off with racism and real racism stuff that we made up to try to get advantage over other groups.

This is something that's human. And I would argue that it is rooted in sin. And I would define sin for us as our attempt to try to get good things most of the time by our own means when God has provided away for us.

And so when we are trying to do things our way, instead of actually following what God is trying to lead us to do, we often end up doing really bad things. And one of the things that we have done, there are kinds of isms that we can trace to sin. But one of those isms is to try to separate and to try to gain advantage over one another by making up these racial and ethnic differences.

So, you know, when we think about race, we could go back to the founding of modern anthropology and the cockazooie and the Negroids and the Mongoloid peoples and parente Boaz was a racist and all that kind of stuff. That's part of it. And then we could look at ethnicity as being culture.

And so there are subgroups that are all under those racial categories that kind of go along with that. You know, it was all made up for a purpose of people trying to gain social political economic advantage over people. And so at the root, it's selfishness.

And so when we are trying to assert our own sovereignty and our own independence from God, you know, a lot of that relates to other things that we talk about like selfishness and greed and pride and arrogance and all those other things that we think about as sort of being fundamentally sort of part of our fallen nature that Christ is trying to redeem us from. In the context of thinking about things like racism and prejudice, you know, I think a lot of people are taught that racism sort of deals with institutional, structural sort of edifices that are there to try to help promote and preserve these hierarchies and prejudice is something that's a little bit more personal. When you're harboring personal biases against each other and the personal biases usually inform a lot of the structural edifices and the institutional practices and the rules that we create.

But we also nowadays need to think about sort of the sort of more unconscious and more subtle things, ways that these play out in real life. So in thinking about privilege, we are all advantaged and disadvantaged, usually in different dimensions of our lives. So there are ways that we can be advantaged and there are ways that we can be disadvantaged.

And privilege can sometimes happen unconsciously. So even if you don't necessarily subscribe to the point of view that, you know, certain racial groups are better than others or certain racial groups have advantages than others, because these things have historical meaning. And in the context of the United States, they are legally inscribed.

I mean, there have been court cases to decide, you know, are Chinese Americans like white or black? Do they have to go to segregated schools? Are Indian Americans black or white? There was this whole rule about whether or not Armenians were white or black. So it was the Supreme Court that decided that Kim Kardashian was white. Like, I mean, I'm not kidding about this stuff.

She has her own checkbox, Kardashian. Right. Like, there are like, you know, these things that have legally happened.

So even though they're made up, like they're very real and they can't go away that easily as a result of the fact that they now got hundreds of years of history. And law and practice. Like there's, you know, the office of management budget in the census, you know, has decided who falls into which category.

These things are actually very, very real. And as a result of it, people have privileges. So even if you might not think of yourself as prejudice, and even if you are, in fact, not prejudice, there are sometimes certain advantages and disadvantages that you have, because those titles, those boxes come with years of history and years of accumulations of wealth, accumulations of certain types of advantages, creations of networks that really do affect people's life chances.

It's a phenomenal response. And you captured so much of it. I think that the two things I would build on what you said, because I actually agree with Paul that except for the sin part, but we can talk about that later.

Not because I don't agree that it is incredibly sinful. It's just a different conception of the sin. But just to, I think that the issue of structures and the individual are so powerful, because they think oftentimes in our popular discourse around race and racism, it becomes brought down to the individual.

What did that cop do? What did the student do? What did the store owner do? What did the thief do? Right? And so the individual is obviously fundamentally important because we impact one another on a regular basis, on a daily basis. But this point that I really want to bring home, but what Andres saying about how the individual prejudices and

manifestations of bias end up impacting policy and structural and systemic and endemic racism. So then we need to be actually able to talk about the school to prison pipeline.

We need to be able to talk about unfair, unequal sentencing when it comes to small drug crimes. We need to be able to talk about who gets access to reproductive healthcare. These are all linked issues that then get embedded under a broader framework of racism that is far beyond the individual.

The second point I want to bring home is this question about privilege. And we talk about it a lot on college campuses, right? It's a powerful framework to be able to understand. People are often very uncomfortable talking about privilege.

Very uncomfortable because nobody wants to feel bad. That's understandable. I'm not trying to make you go around feeling like dukes, right? That's a slang term that we won't expand on it.

That's not the point of being able to ascertain or understand one's own privilege. The point of being able to unpack privilege, for example, I'll use my own body as an example. I am a cisgendered woman, meaning my sex and my gender match.

They're not in conflict or anything for me, right? I am middle class currently. I'm highly educated. I am straight.

I am fluent English speaker, right? I have tremendous access to privilege. And what's the fundamental base of privilege? I don't have to think about it. I don't have to think about what bathroom to use.

At certain times will I be safe or unsafe at certain times? Well, who will think what about me? Et cetera, et cetera. On the flip side, this is the part about privilege. And this is the thing about domination and subordination living in one body.

At the same time, I'm a woman. And I'm a woman of color. And I grew up low income.

Right? And I'm fairly young appearing. So, shouldn't be laughing at that, people. Right? So, do people discount what I have to say because of the nexus of these sets of identities? So, privilege and subordination can live in one body.

So, the point is not to feel bad about it. The point is to be able to say, where do I get privilege simply by being born the way that I am? I don't have to think about it. I get the benefit of the doubt.

I'm not paying a tax. Right? A psychological spiritual tax on certain parts of my identity. And then to go beyond that.

Right? I want to be able to talk about this later. It's not enough to feel bad. We need to move past guilt and feeling bad and shame to what do we do about it.

And that's the action part of it. Because otherwise, it's just sympathy. It's not radical empathy.

It's not solidarity. And I want us to be able to talk about that. Awesome.

I was just writing down some of the words I didn't understand. But there were many of them. I say T-verbals.

Math was, you know what I'm saying? Verbal was down here. So, it's like systemic, endemic. I lost right there.

Thank you. But thank you for those great mon-- all along, it's great. So, let's actually switch gears sort of to what you were talking about.

So, maybe you can go next, which is what you want to talk about, which is sort of how this looks like. What does action look like now that we've talked about who we are, sort of the definitions of these words, and sort of what's broken in the world. You guys both agreed in this sense.

There's something broken that there is sin. So, how do we go ahead and repair this? Let me just phrase it the way I was thinking about this. What do you guys think or what do you, let me think about racial justice, maybe reconciliation, right? How to bring this tension back together again? Maybe some of the barriers you see where America is now and in terms of racial justice, in terms of reconciliation.

Can you say a few words? Absolutely. Yeah. And take your time.

I think we should kind of enjoy learning about this. So, don't feel like you should rush. I'll write it then.

And so, I'm going to build on that. So, I say yes. I do agree with the word sin.

I have to add that I think the sin specific for me, though, is the nexus of racism, late stage capitalism, patriarchy, etc., etc. The dominant forces that impact the very fabric of our lives, in which my levels of anger around this are high and real, because I think that if we're not angry, we're not awake right now. So, I just want to put that out there.

So, let me talk a little bit about barriers first and then maybe talk about the possibilities and what reconciliation might look like. So, for me, some of the, there are many. But some of the biggest barriers I see right now between where America is and what the possibilities are, won't the whole dialogue around post-raciality.

No. [laughter] No. The interesting thing about that, one of my favorite scholars is Eduardo de Bonilla Silva.

He's a sociologist at Duke University. And he writes about the new racism, right? And in a

post-racial society, we are, first of all, we don't want to talk about race or therefore racism and its impact, because when you talk about race, you're the racist. And that's a really, it's like a little gerbil in a cage running around, right? That's a visual for that.

The thing is that we need to be able to not just talk about it, but take action on it, right? So, that, this piece about post-raciality is incredibly problematic. The second piece of that that I find particularly insidious, given that I work with college students, is students who are disconnected from a sense of their ethnic or racial heritage or identity because they feel like they haven't been able to own that. Whether they're white, black, Latino, Asian American, any above, multiracial mixed race, because to own your, that part of your heritage is considered problematic.

And for me, being Indian American, South Asian American, Asian American, and woman of color are so deeply informative to the way that I not just walk and live in the world, but the way that the world walks with me, looks at me, and treats me, that if I was disconnected from those things in this post-racial ideal where we're somehow beyond race, I would be missing something that helps me get up every morning and keep fighting and keep thinking and keep talking. So, those are really rooted for me. So, I think that concept of post-raciality and how it emerges in the discourse around colorblind policies, around let's dismantle the Voting Rights Act.

One of the fundamentally grossest things happening right now, the disenfranchisement of so many populations, not just black people who we think, we think black, right? But it's poor people, it's working class people, it's women who change their names after getting married. Don't do it, women. Because women who change their names after getting married, because if you don't have the ID fix, you can't go to the polls.

When I say that these issues are interconnected, it doesn't matter if you don't hold that particular identity, we are all walking this path together. The other thing that I think is deep problematic is the black-white paradigm, right? Now, granted, the majority of this country is still black and white. The white supremacist history is written on all of our consciousness, all of our bodies, in all of our institutions.

Okay, that's the case. But not just, I'm not just talking about today, fast-growing populations, fast-growing populations are Latino and Asian-American populations. But the problem is when we leave things in a black-white paradigm, number one, it's not a complicated enough story, right? There's so much more going on.

Let's say if we just want to talk about immigration rights, right? We want to talk about immigration justice, and the issue is just one community versus another community. But what I want to talk about is solidarity. What I want to talk about is how people get brought over, claimed, used, abused, and then spit out of a system that's broken for all of us.

So we miss these opportunities if we live only in a black-white paradigm. It's also just not realistic anymore. And I think I would also say that to think that there are some things that are not about race is to sort of miss part of it.

So I'll just give one example. I think a big barrier is when people think race and racism are about the incident, right? That this thing happened, and therefore there's a problem, right? But when I talk about systems and structures, this is pretty powerful. So, for example, no matter where you stand on the question of reproductive rights and abortion, we have seen a war being waged against, for example, Planned Parenthood specifically.

And so you could say, well, my belief systems say that I don't support X, and therefore I'm going to support the senator who chooses to pull funding from Planned Parenthood. That's not just an attack on reproductive rights. It's an attack on poor women and women of color in particular.

So when I talk about the nexus, we miss it if we just say that incident was racist, no, the system is structured as racist because of the relationship between race and class, who has access to what resources, when, where, and why. So the choices that we make seemingly three steps away end up still having a relationship to the question of race and class. Does that make sense? What do I think justice looks like? I mean, you've decided to give one sentence.

Give one sentence. You brought up a point right when you were giving an introduction about the golden rule. Do unto others as you would have done unto you.

I would suggest the platinum rule. Not to do it with the golden rule, but how many of you have heard about the platinum rule? The former institute, Madras, thanks, the L. The platinum rules do unto others as they would have done unto them. Do unto others as they would have done unto them.

The fundamental precept behind that which pushes back against the golden rule. The golden rule centers the individual as the center of the decision making and the knowledge and what is right and what is just. So if it's right for me, then it's right for you.

The platinum rule says, I need to take the time to learn what is right for you before I can determine what is right for our communities or our society. Does that make sense? So I'm not, I'm not, I'm not trying to say golden rule bad. I'm saying there is more.

That's just one, I mean, I could write essays about this, but that's one sentence about just thinking about the platinum rule that makes me think about what true justice might look like. No, it's so much done packed, right? These are difficult things. So, thank you.

I've got a idea. I think you raised a number of wonderful points. You know, I'd like to think about it sort of like what's the relationship between racial justice and racial reconciliation.

And in many ways, I don't think you can have racial justice until you have racial reconciliation. And I don't think we're anywhere close to being racially reconciled. And if I think about it, I think racial reconciliation is a microcosm of the estrangement that many of us feel from God, even if we name the name of Christ sometimes.

And so for me, reconciliation is a restoring of a relationship that's been estranged or that's been severed. And so in order for us to be reconciled, there has to be an acknowledgement of the estrangement and the root causes of that estrangement. And that's where we fall in short in American society.

We kind of want to jump ahead to racial justice and change a couple of laws, pat ourselves on the back to say everything's okay. We don't use certain words anymore. It's all good.

And we don't actually really seriously examine and interrogate the root causes of the estrangement or really acknowledge one, the injustice of it, the hurt that was caused by it and actually sit and listen to other stories and so I think for a lot of people, they looked at the 1960s, they saw the Civil Rights Movement that didn't ask for a whole lot. It asked for stuff that they all could agree on and that was actually attainable in that time period. They were able to achieve political equality for blacks.

They were able to achieve on paper social equality in terms of having access to public accommodations and institutions. And we all assume racism is dumb at that point, that there's nothing more that government can do. Instead of looking at everything else in American society that still might perpetuate, that still might actually still inscribe a certain type of advantage on people, even if on paper, even if nobody is actually intending to be racist anymore.

And so we haven't had that hard conversation. We tend to define racism not just by incidents, but based on buzzwords. So it's not racist if I didn't say certain trigger words.

It's not racist unless I'm doing something that's overtly egregious that everybody can recognize as obviously racist. Like, you know, dressing up as different groups and a pejorative or negative. We're just doing something that's just completely off the pale, ridiculous.

We have a harder time talking about systemic issues. So people argue about whether or not systemic inequality exists. And so that ends up being a difficult conversation to have when you can't even argue about sort of the premise of the problem.

Like people are disputing whether or not the problem itself exists. And we also have a really hard time acknowledging that there may be such a thing as unconscious or implicit biases that also could be informing a lot of the decisions that we make. And so because we aren't having those conversations, it's actually stopping the conversation and

stopping the type of dialogue that could actually be restored.

So it's hard to have reconciliation without kind of confession and repentance. And so we haven't really had that opportunity as a nation to have that kind of confessional moment, that moment of repenting where people can then kind of come together and be restored. If we had that moment, then we can then start the work of racial justice, which would be to figure out everything that we've done wrong and then figure out the way to go back and fix all of those things.

And then not just fix the surface stuff because we fixed the surface stuff in America, but we haven't gone deeper to fix some of the things that are actually still affecting our lives. And if we do that, then we're on the path to racial justice and I always say, we'll know when America's equal win. And this is not saying that everybody's going to end up with the same outcomes.

Nobody's trying to guarantee, you know, similar outcomes for people. But what I want to be able to look at are your odds. And so for a child that's born in this country today, if I put a black baby, a white baby, a Latino baby, an Asian American baby, a Native American baby, baby of any background.

And those kids all have the same life chances. Not they're all going to end up in the same place. Because people make choices.

You know, people have different types of sort of natural talents and other kinds of things. We know that it's not going to necessarily end up the same way. But I shouldn't be able to look at a set of babies today and predict just by looking at the color of their skin, which one of you is going to die first, which one of you is going to be less likely to graduate from high school, which one of you is going to be more likely to go to jail, which one of you is going to be more likely to get shot by the police.

And we can do that just by looking at the color of their skin. That's unjust. That's what we are working to try to fix by doing all that other stuff first.

I can get behind confession and repentance on this angle, by the way. Good. Good.

That's great. We'll talk more. So one of the things that I'm actually getting tired of is that you guys are agreeing with each other.

Ready. You're all nodding. I'm nodding.

We're like basically holding hands and dancing, which is awkward for Indians as it is for me. But the title, the subtitle of this today's event is actually called Christianity and Activism Collide. So there must be some tension when it comes to our faith and how it plays a role in all this.

I think we've kind of laid beautifully. You guys have talked about the definition of these things, your background of these things. But before we kind of go a little bit in, I just want to just give an encouragement to the audience.

One of my old friends used to say that we used to be a people who were thick-skinned and soft-hearted. And now we're people who are thin-skinned and hard-hearted. In the sense that things easily affect us.

And it's hard for us to understand how somebody else is going to be. So my encouragement as we kind of go through harder things and maybe to push back on one another is, even for you guys to listen and even ask questions, is to be a little more thick-skinned. Just to see what somebody else might be facing and to be soft-hearted.

So having said that, a little bit of a background, maybe soon you can go first. Maybe talk as sort of as somebody who's a humanist who's thinking about these things and somebody who's an activist. You know, there are these tensions that have happened from looking at social justice from a Christian lens.

And actually looking at social justice and activism from a non-Christian lens or maybe a secular humanist lens on matters of ideology or methodology. Do you feel a conflict between sort of your atheism and activism? And would you feel attention sort of from the Christian activism that you've seen, maybe in justice or reconciliation, those kind of topics we've been thinking about? Okay. Well, it's fascinating, right? Because there's a strong tradition in Christianity and Catholicism around justice, around social justice.

And you see that through so many leaders, thinkers, street justice activists. But I don't hear that as the dominant discourse very much. I think that if people involved in individual church-type spaces, maybe they are hearing it.

But the national dominant discourse that I hear, again, and I'm the atheist, right? So I'm sitting here, just talking to you from that perspective. But the national dominant discourse that I hear coming out of, unfortunately right now, the Christian right, but even mainstream Christianity is either silence or fairly vicious attitudes towards communities of color. When you talked about hard-heartedness, I see very little empathy.

I see very little empathetic pain that communities are experiencing together. And that really bothers me. That bothers me just as a person who... I feel like I'm grieving a lot of the time.

And I think grief is the right word for it because we are... This is not anything new. Maybe the amount of attention we're getting because, particularly because thanks to social media, because if we were just looking at traditional mainstream media, we wouldn't know shit that was going on, right? Excuse me for cussing. I told them I wouldn't, but then it flipped out.

Dinner was an awesome conversation. Thanks. But the issue of invisibility and silence really bothers me from those who do have it in their tradition to speak up.

So I think when the history and the power has been there and the willful choice to be ignorant, silent, or in fact silencing, that makes me enraged. So it brings up a couple points to me. And I really love how you talked about confession and repentance, but the root causes of the estrangement.

That was really powerful because where's the space to talk about? Maybe this is happening in some of your commutes, but I don't see it nationally and broadly. Where is the space to talk about the Bible as a source of domination and control? When it comes to issues of racial justice, also economic justice, also gender justice, but they're all intersectional issues, right? We're talking about race tonight. So where is the space to talk about how the Bible has been a tool of liberation and a source of solace and also the tool of the masters in the past and today to control congregations and to control human black bodies themselves? Is that happening in your churches? For those of you who do identify as Christian? I don't know.

And I feel like there's something that needs to be done there. Actually, I do know. I don't hear enough about it because I feel like if it was happening, at least see it somewhere.

The turn the other cheek idea? I couldn't. I don't know if many people who are angry and hurting right now could. What is the demand being placed on people who are hurt and marginalized and being struck down to turn the other cheek? Who's cheek always has to be turned? That's a question that bothers me.

And I guess my third question with this is who do you side with? So those of you who do identify as Christian or of any faith or any of us, right, of any background, who do you side with? You side with order or with justice in these larger questions, whether it's around immigration or black lives matter or anything else. The murders of black trans women, all of these questions, order cannot trump justice in a true moral paradigm. So my morality is strong, but my morality tells me this, order cannot trump justice in a true moral paradigm, and so that makes me think about Jesus versus the Romans.

My conception, my understanding of what I've read about Jesus was that he was counter to the Romans who valued order over justice and over morality. That's my understanding of it. And yet, again, I don't see enough of that dialectic occurring.

And I guess the last point I'll make is I see that when it comes to, for example, the corruption of Christian leaders' messages. The great Reverend Martin Luther King, one of the most brilliant thinkers and writers will ever, ever, ever have the blessing and joy to have read his work and to know. But the way that his message gets co-opted by many people, but particularly by Christians who want the gentle part of it without the revolutionary part of it.

And Martin and Malcolm were a lot more similar, closer to the end of both of their lives. But if you're looking at Martin Luther King's work, then you need to look at the anti-imperialist and the messages around poverty, and you need to look at the messages around community-based justice. And so I think that even if we're going to pull from Christian scholars or Christian activists, what parts of the message are you choosing to look at? That impacts me a lot.

So I do feel that there's tension there. And so I think, I'll just leave it with that, that if we're not, if you're, because I can't say, "R," if you're a version of Christianity doesn't include a critical assessment of Christianity's role. Past and present in maintaining the dominant order, then there's a tension there.

You can either respond or add on to whatever you think is. No, I mean, I hear a lot of what you say, and sort of as a Christian, I am always concerned about making sure that even when I have to take a stand that is unpopular, that I do so in a way that is loving, that is respectful, that is affirming of people's humanity. And I don't think I always see that in my brothers and sisters in Christ.

And so I can't defend other people's behavior, but I can say, "I hear you and I apologize for them." And hopefully, one day they'll be enlightened. I mean, you know, one of the techniques, I don't see a tension with my own activism. Because when I read Scripture, I see Proverbs 31, 8, 9, that's what I'm supposed to stand up for.

I'm supposed to stand up for the unfortunate. I'm supposed to show justice to them. I read Scripture where the New Testament was, is that we're not supposed to have respective persons, and so that should be a guiding influence of my life.

I see some of the radical things that Jesus did. I'm not necessarily a proponent of liberation theology, but there were things that Jesus did that were actually extremely countercultural and revolutionary. And so, while I think his primary purpose in coming was to save people's souls, there were also things that he was doing, talking to Samaritans, talking to women, that are just incredibly important in that we have to take notice of.

I think, at least as far as what the church does and doesn't do, there are pockets of evangelical Christianity in the United States that are very sensitive to these issues, and that are, in fact, doing the hard work of thinking about these issues in a meaningful way. And I think just as part of any group in the United States, you have people who are sensitive to these issues and you have people that aren't. And I think part of it is that people are influenced by the larger culture, that there probably isn't enough introspection in the American church in particular about what privilege looks like.

And if I may be so bold, I think that there is a general kind of superficiality, one in theology in general, in the American evangelical church where on basic, sort of, you

know, basic kind of like catechism kinds of things, we don't know Scripture all that well. We are lazy about sort of, you know, making sure that we maintain those personal relationships with Christ, that we study the Bible, that we pray, that we do all of those things. So you can ask people, you know, questions, big pew, did this study where they were asking sort of like basic questions about Christianity and atheist can answer more questions than people who identified as evangelical.

Like, that's just, that's deeply problematic. And the function of our selfishness and our self-interest, it also manifests itself in our preferences where we make decisions not necessarily based on what's right or what God might have us to do, but whether or not it actually helps advance our own agenda. And so, you know, sometimes people prefer policies because, hey, it's going to help them, not necessarily whether or not it helps other people.

And that infects the rest of our sort of lives too, so even though we might go to church or claim to be Christians, if we're making our decisions based on self-interest, or sometimes even based on our group interest, in this particular case, if that group interest is the type of group interest that's going to come at the expense of other people, then it's going to manifest itself in every aspect of our lives. So Christians have been a part of this wider American culture, and they've been infected with the same stuff that everybody else has been in, and if they refuse to allow themselves to be convicted by God the Holy Spirit about what to do about these issues, then they're going to manifest the same ugliness that everybody else has manifested. So, you know, there are times when I may take a stand that looks deviate slightly, doesn't deviate completely, from what some of my brothers and sisters in Christ do.

So I'd like to think I'm more critical about these things. I certainly have been in church services and Sunday school classes where people have said stuff where I've been like, that's the most ignorant thing I've ever heard in my life. Oh my gosh.

And in those instances, that's an opportunity for me to use the guess the talents and the background that I've been afforded to be able to educate and enlighten. It's also an opportunity for me to remember to show love and to show grace because I could also start to take pride in this knowledge, this deeper enlightenment, and end up becoming sort of just as biased towards them on another dimension as they are toward me on one dimension. So, you know, there are all these things that I think about when I think about those issues, but inherently, I don't think it is a conflict for me as a Christian to care about my faith in God and to prioritize that above all else and to still think that I need to be thinking, studying, writing, and working for racial justice.

One of the words that both of you mentioned in the past hour has been the word forgiveness and we kind of touched on it a little bit or talk about sin in relation to that stuff and I assume you kind of put it in different ways. I just, we thought about this

question, I have no idea what your answers are going to be. So, I'm really curious.

And it actually is a case study, how you guys would like to respond to, and we're talking about the abstract notion of forgiveness. Look at this one case. There's these videos of the families after the shooting at the Mother Manual Church, the AME Church in Charleston.

And what happened right afterwards after the shooting was like relatively just like a few days afterwards is that there was forgiveness offered to the killer after the deaths. It wasn't a long period of mourning, maybe a year or something, it was just within a few days. And lots of emotions happened because of this.

But a lot of people applauded and said, "That's great. I'm glad that your faith is allowed to do this thing." And other people were sort of appalled by it. Like, that hasn't even sunk in yet.

And yet what right do you have to forgive this woman? So, maybe, you could take a crack at this, but maybe as a humanist, as an atheist, can you tell me what your reaction was to the forgiveness, maybe of how the families extended, maybe as a way of contextualizing the word forgiveness and sort of the word sin and all that. And maybe even more, like what do you think, what role do you think forgiveness should play or shouldn't play when it comes to actually seeing justice and reconciliation? How does that fit into all this? I think one of my first reactions was stunned, stunned, awed silence because I couldn't. I still can't.

And those weren't my family members. So, the power that they had to forgive and the potential healing that may engender is stunning. That's the only word I can come up with.

The twin emotion to that is, no. He doesn't deserve forgiveness. He has no right to forgiveness.

They had their loved ones stolen from them in a church. I'm an atheist. I know you don't do that in a church.

That's a sin. So, I mean, I barely have words for this because it is mind-boggling. So then you ask this question about the reactions that came from general society, right, and the applause that was given to them.

And so then that leads me to two or three other points which is, was the applause then given and then people could wash their hands of it? This is not about the families. They deserve to do whatever they're going to do. If they want to forgive, if they want to be angry, that's their right.

But where does this then absolve? People are saying, well, they forgive. They forgive him

so I can let go of my quest for justice or my quest for answers or anything like that. My work I need to do in my home church or in my hometown or in my workplace or in my clinic group or whatever it is around justice, right, around what does it mean to actually live in a true diverse democracy, not just in name only.

The second part of that is I feel you ask too much. How do you ask people to forgive when that's happened? Again, that is the choice of the individual to forgive and a brave choice. But I also think that it also presents the secondary false dichotomy that, oh, well, see, those were the good black people, the good black Christians, they forgave.

But look at those bad rioters in Baltimore and Ferguson. Why can't they just forgive and forget? And let me, I'm going to reclaim that because they weren't rioters. That was an uprising, right, that is the voice of those who are oppressed and can't are not being heard taking to the streets to be heard, right.

And of course, when I talk about media, it's so powerful because the only images people saw were of, oh, the one CVS that got burned, not the hundreds of peaceful demonstrations. Not that they should have to be peaceful, right. Where does righteous anger have a place side by side with forgiveness in this quest for essentially racial reparations, not just monetary, but the true healing and discussion that has to come out of that.

I go back to like, let's make an analogy to the 2008 financial crisis. Everything collapsed, people lost everything and no punishments given, but we don't want to look back, we just want to keep on moving forward. That's what our own government told us.

What do you mean we want to look forward? What does that mean when people are still struggling the aftermath of the 2008 recession, the new depression, right. So these things, because the impact is still felt, how does the healing ever occur if there's actually no space for that. And I just want to mention one last point about this.

You specifically brought up Mother Emanuel, AME Church. One of the things Dylan Roof, the murderer, said was along the lines of we have to protect our women, meaning white women, when he shot the parishioners who had allowed him to come into their church, right. And so the parallel strands around faith, around Christianity specifically, and white women in particular, is a particular narrative that needs to be unpacked because that is the same narrative that was used against Emmett Till, that was used against hundreds of black men who are lynched, which is the protection of white women's purity.

So I'm talking to the women in the room, how are we implicated, and specifically white women implicated in your bodies being used as a source of pride and protectionism by white men against black communities. In this case, black communities, we can talk about multiple communities, right. The narrative of the rapist and the victim in this particular construction.

All of this is embedded in this one particular incident that you brought up that really points to 15 different complicated stories. So, that's great. Before I ask you to answer, can I just push back on one small thing? Of course.

Clarification. So I love that you're phrasing of righteous anger, in terms of that's the right thing. But I just wanted to, just to be clear, does forgiveness play a role in reconciliation? Like in other words, I know you said when you were talking about this, it was a huge that you couldn't understand it, right.

So I just want to make sure that righteous anger does play a role clearly, right, as something that pushed that. I think the reason I brought that up is because there's almost no space for the righteous anger, right. That if you are angry, well again, you're the problem.

Why can't you just forgive and forget and let bygones be guy by him? Yes, I think forgiveness has to come before. Forgiveness does not come before the apology, before the exposing of the past, before the humbling. That has to come before forgiveness can be given.

So until then, there's righteous anger. Thank you. Thank you.

Well, I think we'll disagree on sort of what comes first, forgiveness or reconciliation. So I think forgiveness has to be what happened. Forgiveness is what the individual who has been victimized has to do in order to move on.

And I think one of the things that's interesting in terms of forgiveness, forgiveness is not merited. None of us deserves to be forgiven for all the stuff that we've done that's been stupid. And yet Christ died for us so that we could get received forgiveness of sins.

And that's what's motivating the decision to kind of choose to start that forgiveness process with them. You know, when the week that the Mother Manual shooting happened, it happened to be on the road. So the night that that shooting happened, I was back in Newark just making sure that I was kind of keeping up my follow-up research in the city where I spent a whole lot of time.

And so I got back to my hotel room after the city council meeting that night, and I saw the shooting that happened. And the more and more, you know, I heard about what happened, and I realized that Dylan roof sat through the Bible study before he shot everybody. That, I mean, that was hard for me to understand.

You know, right now my schedule, I don't go to church on Wednesday nights right now because of my schedule, but I spent plenty of Wednesday night at church. So I know what it's like to be a church on a Wednesday night. And so that gripped my heart like, oh my goodness, that could have been me.

And when I was growing up at church and we did Wednesday night prayer meeting, we literally got on our knees at pews and pray it. So like what would happen if somebody comes in and you're kind of in a very vulnerable position at that moment and somebody comes in and moves you down. And that wasn't quite what happened at Mother Emanuel, but I thought about that.

And that was, you know, that really got to me. It was also really hard to understand how somebody could sit through a message and hear the word and still then shoot people. And that's just a function of our depravity.

That's a function of our sin nature. And so while most of us know how to control that so that we don't do that, we're all capable of doing that kind of stuff. And that was what Christ came to die for, not just the petty sins or so the things that seem small, but for those deep, utter depraved things.

And so if Christ can't die for the little white lies, then he's got to die for those most heinous things as well. Otherwise the redemption doesn't mean anything. So there were all kinds of things.

God, how could this happen? Why these people? And then the next day I had to happen to find out that one of my friends knew Clementa Pinkney, the pastor of the church. And so it was just, there was just a whole lot that was going on that week. And so when, you know, I heard the arraignment and I heard the families of the victims forgive Dylan Roof.

You know, I knew why they had to do it. Because God tells us that if we don't forgive others, then he won't forgive us. Like we basically have to show the same mercy to folks that Christ did through sort of redeeming us at Calvary knowing that that might do something him one day.

And one of the things that I just pray as a Christian, that he, because he said at one point from some of the stories that have kind of gone out there, there's a story out there that says that he thought about not doing it after saying how nice everybody was to him before he did it. But he still felt that he had to kind of proceed with this attempt to start a race war. Despite the death of the Immanuel 9, I hope that the forgiveness and whatever was taught in that lesson gets to him one day.

That God still has a way to get to him and that there will be a story of his transformation. I don't think, you know, it looks like he'll probably end up in prison for the rest of his life. I think that that's precisely where he needs to be.

But there's a way for him to be free spiritually, even though he has to serve out of sentence for what he did, which was horrible. So that I understood. I understood why the families of the victims had to do that.

That's what Christ calls us to do. But then it was the rest of us that I had a problem with.

And so by the weekend, sort of the day after the arraignment, I was in North Carolina.

It was in my hotel room watching the news. And for some reason I was watching Fox News. It's not my role in practice, but I was both.

But I happened to be watching Fox and Friends weekend. And so that was the lead story. And the whole slant of the story was, "Yay Christians, Jesus won in all of this.

Isn't this great? Pat us on the back." It really was annoying to see sort of how proud they were in themselves, not necessarily in what the families did, because that's unimaginable. And I don't think unless you've been in that situation, you really understand what it takes to have to do that. But to watch these people sit there and pat themselves on the back and go see this just proves how much better Christians are than everybody else.

I was offended. I was ticked off. Because what we don't understand is that the families of the victims had to do that because they were directly affected by what Dylan Roof did.

We as a society were not affected in the same way. And so I think there was a space for righteous anger. I think there is a space for reflection.

And there's a space for us to figure out what to do. And so I think that a lot of this was, "Let's pat ourselves on the back and let's pretend like this wasn't part of some larger systemic issue that we've got to deal with." We have to deal with the fact that somebody taught Dylan Roof all of that sort of hatred. And we have to figure out sort of how to eradicate that from our society.

So this wasn't the time to pat ourselves on the back for what the families did in obligation to their savior. This was the time for us as a society to examine how do we create people like Dylan Roof. And yeah, there is a spiritual dimension on which Dylan Roof is like all of us sort of subject to those types of darker spiritual forces.

But then there is stuff that we taught him. So as a society we taught him that he was better than black people because of the color of his skin. As a society we taught him not to be able to discern good history and bad history on the internet.

There are all kinds of things that we as a society need to be reflecting. And so we didn't take that moment to reflect upon that. We took down a flag that needed to be taken down.

That unfortunately took nine people to die. People have been trying for years to get that flag taken off the South Carolina Capitol. Nine people didn't have to die.

And if all that happens in South Carolina is that a flag came down. I grew up about 15 minutes from the Confederate White House in Richmond. So I grew up seeing

Confederate flags.

Literally my orthodontist office is a block from the Confederate White House when I was growing up. So I get growing up around seeing that type of iconography. Maybe not as acute as seeing it in South Carolina State Capitol or in certain parts of the Deep South.

But this is part of growing up. And it's funny to go back to Virginia now and see Confederate flags in places where I know they weren't before as a result of this debate. So, yeah, no, so that's nothing new.

But if all we do is like, I've taken down Confederate flags and maybe renamed Jeff Davis highways and there are tons of them in various places in the country, then we haven't done enough. And so that was what irritated me. That the family had to forgive, but we as a society needed to reflect and needed to figure out a way to do better.

And I think in some ways, some people did that, but I think in other ways we kind of missed the boat. Can I build on what Andres said just for a moment? I think that's a spot on incredibly powerful. The tremendous loss of nine lives and all the radius around them got hit by that.

And like you just said, this has been something that's been bothering too. If all that comes out of that is taking down flags, taking down flags is important. Those flags are a visible reminder of the choice half of our, over half of our nation made to say that we care more about owning humans than anything else.

Flat out. That is that history. It's not about, oh, it's, we have a glorious southern past, but there's a history that it praises.

So the flag coming down is important, but if the policies of, for example, South Carolina don't change, then nothing has really changed. So one of the things Clementa Pinkney, Reverend Clementa Pinkney was advocating for was more human policies in South Carolina, especially around working class communities of color, around better health protections, right? Because South Carolina is one of the states that has just chopped healthcare for poor people and working class people, many of whom happen to be people of color, but many of whom are also white people. But when I say these issues are intersectional, right? Like when you cut healthcare, you don't just hurt one group of people, you cut, you hurt all sorts of people, especially any kind of working class or low-income people.

These are the policies he was actively trying to push for in his state that has doubled down on regressive economic policies that have hurt the most vulnerable in the state. And so the loss of him is a loss to his family, his community, his church, is also a loss to those who are advocating for those kinds of policies, and it makes even more poignant that if the only thing that comes down is the flag, but there is no change in policy, that

means there is no reflection and there is no justice. And I also think the other part of it that was actually really interesting was the narrative about Dylan Ruffy's immediate aftermath was to try to figure out a way that he was crazy.

And it's in part because we have this discussion about guns in society and mass shootings and mental health. It's an important thing. So when they couldn't quite say that he had mental illness, it was he's a drug addict, he's a loser, he's a this, he's a that.

It was all this stuff to try to distance Dylan Ruff from the rest of society to sort of act like he was an aberration. Well, he was an aberration and then maybe he picked up a gun and shot a whole bunch of people. But no, I mean, no, there were lots of people with racist attitudes that he picked up on and he just took it farther than other people did.

And we kind of own that. I mean, we seriously have to own that. So like, you're trying to give yourself a pass by distancing yourself from Ruff and then focusing on the good of that forgiveness moment without figuring out that we didn't have to forgive Dylan Ruff for anything because he didn't shoot us and he didn't shoot our family members.

But it did say something about our society and there's something that we can do from that. Find more content like this on baritas.org. Be sure to follow the Baritas Forum on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

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