

Session of Future Work of the Permanent Forum: Feedback Recommendations

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In 1897, writing in the Atlantic Magazine, W.E.B. DuBois asked the question, “how does it feel to be a problem?” DuBois was responding to the dynamic of being “othered,” where the color of Black skin, on a psychic level, serves as a pretext for white supremacy, and the oppression of Black people.” He spoke of a world which “yields no self-consciousness,” but causes Black people to see ourselves through the revelation of the other world.

As a pastor, lawyer and ecumenical leader in the United States my work intersects issues facing people of African descent on several levels. The Permanent Forum for People of African Descent is critical to the representational needs of the people of Africa and the African diaspora. This is a critical space, where we not only tell our stories, but it is also where our collective experiences and voices become transformative and substantive.

In the United States the murder of George Floyd created an international catharsis, mobilizing people of African descent and our allies, providing critical impetus to the Black Lives Matter struggle, and setting a context for the struggle against the over policing of Black communities and the extrajudicial killing of Black people. The Black experience has also included the commodification of people of African descent. For the Americas and the Caribbean, this story begins with the enslavement of Black bodies in which many of our white Christian faith communities were complicit and supportive in forming these dehumanizing structures designed to lock Black people into a permanent condition of social and economic degradation based on skin color. African and African descent people have been objectified; we have seen our human rights erased, and our people were designated as property in the promotion of a burgeoning capitalist society.

Our nation fought a Civil War over enslaved people and a search for a solution concerning the “problem,” of Black people- where the expatriation of Black people was promoted as a viable option for moving freed Black people out of the country. Reconstruction in our nation spawned the goal of codified citizenship rights for Black people which was to result in equality, justice reparatory initiatives and a requirement that no one would be left behind. This, however, is an ongoing struggle. These dreams never fully came to fruition.

With the end of the Civil War came Black Codes and Jim Crow segregation, designed to lock Black people into sharecropping relationships in the South, that once again commodified them and also formed the national genesis for the mass incarceration of Black bodies. As people left the South seeking opportunities in the Midwest, West and Northeast, racism simply evolved, for example, into insurance and mortgage redlining; and restrictive covenants promoted by the federal government, where white communities would place racial restrictions in deeds, inhibited the acquisition of mortgages and property insurance to Black people, and controlled and critically restricted, and in many cases prohibited the sale of property to Black people. Racism is perhaps never eradicated, it simply morphs in new and more sophisticated ways, designed to

commodify and oppress Black people. In our context today, for example, social media and algorithm bias is the strategy that locks people of African descent into realities that inhibit the generational wealth accumulation, credit acquisition, access to adequate health care and technological enhancement while also promoting dangerous and racist rhetoric.

We are also concerned about the role that right wing, white supremacist religious groups play in constructing the spiritual architecture of racism and oppression on a global level. Such religious groups play significant roles in the creation of policies that promote white supremacy through a theology of hate.

In the United States, in particular, we also stand against the theology of Christian Nationalism and other like minded movements. This religious conception is grounded in white supremacy, xenophobia, anti-semitism, homophobia and transphobia. We stand against any religious practice that undermines the sacred worth of persons, inclusive of people of African descent. Our faith is not framed in national power; our ethic is established in promoting love and the sacred worth of persons of African descent.

We are not the problem, we are the solution.

Recommendations

1. That the Permanent Forum for People of African Descent collaborate with civil society partners such as the World Council of Churches, the Holy See, African Traditional Religion leadership and other faith based organizations to create a forum on reparatory justice and the obligation of faith communities to make amends for their participation in the enslavement and povertization of African and African descent persons.
2. That within the Permanent Forum attention is given to the destructive and formative role of right wing religious groups that promote white supremacy, xenophobia, LGBTQI+ discrimination and misogyny.
3. That the Permanent Forum promotes an interfaith gathering across regional boundaries to discuss the role of faith communities in combatting religious based white supremacy and informing the policy making agenda to confront racism.
4. That the Permanent Forum addresses freedom of speech and religion concerns in its framework, as it combats racism that is manifested through religious expression and entities.