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# The Perils and Promise of Privilege

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# The Perils and Promise of Privilege



## Preface

When I first delivered a version of this essay at the 2019 Vocation of a Lutheran College conference at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, I started with a “Land Acknowledgement.”

The conference was entitled “Beyond Privilege: Engaging

Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity.” It was hosted by colleges and universities affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, on lands once occupied exclusively by indigenous peoples. A land acknowledgement is one small way of acknowledging the peoples who originally inhabited lands colonized by European settlers. It also acknowledges the enduring relationship that exists between indigenous peoples and their traditional lands (“Honor Native Land”).

I spoke about how the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area is home to one of the largest and most diverse urban indigenous populations. That population is comprised primarily of the Dakhóta (Dakota), and the Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe) (“Dakota People”). The Dakota represent one of three major language divisions among people commonly referred to by European colonizers as the Sioux. The so-called Sioux are a confederacy of several “tribes.” The Eastern Dakota (often referred to as the Santee) reside primarily in Minnesota and Northern Iowa. They were the inhabitants of the land of Augsburg’s campus when European colonizers first arrived.

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The proper name for the Sioux is Oceti Sakowin, (*Oh-cháy-dee Shah-kóh-wee*), which means, “Seven Council Fires.” The original Sioux nation was made up of seven council fires (or “tribes”). Each of these council fires was made up of small kinship “bands” (or “families”) based on dialect and geographic proximity.

Within a context of European conquest and colonialism, a land acknowledgment is not simply a way of giving thanks for Mother Earth, which represents an indigenous practice. It is also a way of honoring the indigenous people who inhabited these lands long before one of the most egregious displays of white privilege—the genocide and near total decimation of this nation’s original inhabitants.

Indeed, it would have been a great display of hypocrisy to have a conference on privilege in America and not acknowledge on whose land we reside. We have retained names like White Bear Lake, Minnesota or Winneshiek County, Iowa (where I live), while giving little (if any) acknowledgment of indigenous peoples. Land acknowledgments represent one small way of foregrounding and understanding the history of land possession and dispossession as well as our place within that history. I hope that raising such awareness will cause us to seriously consider and challenge the unacknowledged privilege underlying much of the immigration debate in the United States today.

## Two Uses of Privilege

In this essay, I explore what I call “The Perils and Promise of Privilege,” especially as it relates to diversity, inclusion, and equity within Lutheran higher education.

Privilege has always been used in one of two ways: (1) to preserve privilege by promoting and maintaining inequity, or (2) to challenge privilege by promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Since privilege is relational, it is always possible to find ourselves in relations where we possess more privilege than someone else, even though we may also at times find ourselves in relations where we possess less privilege. The question is how do we use our privilege in those times when we possess more privilege than others? Do we use our privilege to preserve privilege and maintain inequity? Or do we use our privilege to challenge privilege by promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity?

“Do we use our privilege to preserve privilege and maintain inequity? Or do we use our privilege to challenge privilege by promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity?”

Let me be clear these are the *only* two options. We are either preserving the privilege that maintains inequity, or we are challenging privilege and promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity. If we are not doing the latter, we are *by default* doing the former. There is no neutral ground with regards to privilege. To deny that unfair privilege exists or to simply feel guilty and throw up our hands out of frustration, despair, and a sense of hopelessness only results in preserving forms of privilege that maintain inequity.

As a man living in a patriarchal society, I identify with a gender that affords me privilege. Denying the reality of male privilege or becoming defensive or frustrated instead of challenging male privilege only contributes to preserving male privilege and maintaining inequity. Similarly, denying the reality of white privilege or becoming defensive or frustrated instead of challenging white privilege only contributes to preserving white privilege and maintaining racial inequity.

## Contemporary and Historical Examples

Recently a private Jesuit high school in Indianapolis had its status as a “Catholic” school revoked by the Catholic

Archdiocese of Indianapolis. The decision was made because the school refused to fire a teacher who is in a same-sex marriage. The Archbishop issued a decree in June, 2019 stating that Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School “can no longer use the name Catholic and will no longer be identified or recognized as a Catholic institution” (Taylor).

I am familiar with this story because my youngest son attends Brebeuf. The story is a perfect example of the two uses of privilege. While the Archdiocese is using privilege to preserve privilege, Brebeuf is attempting to use privilege in order to challenge privilege.

Days after Brebeuf defied the order of the Indianapolis Archdiocese, the archbishop forced Cathedral High School in Indianapolis to fire a teacher in a civilly sanctioned same-sex marriage. Cathedral is the third Indianapolis Catholic high school to face pressure from Archbishop Charles Thompson over employees in same-sex marriages since Thompson became archbishop in July 2017 (Herron).

One can see the perils of privilege as the Archbishop uses privilege to preserve privilege and promote inequity. We see the promise of privilege, however, as Brebeuf uses its privilege to challenge privilege by promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity.

Let’s turn back 500 years. Many are aware of Martin Luther’s repeated invoking of Christian privilege in order to engage in vitriolic displays of Jewish anti-Semitism. But Luther also used privilege to challenge privilege, as reflected in his early sermon, “Two Kinds of Righteousness”:

For you are powerful, not that you may make the weak weaker by oppression, but that you may make them powerful by raising them up and defending them. You are wise, not in order to laugh at the foolish and thereby make them more foolish, but that you may undertake to teach them as you yourself would wish to be taught. (304)

While the quotation reflects the paternalism of its time, it nevertheless illustrates the idea of using privilege to challenge privilege. As a faculty person teaching at an ELCA college, I often think about the issues of privilege, diversity, inclusion, and equity in light of the Lutheran tradition of vocation and reform.

While I am not a Lutheran, I understand the reform promoted by Martin Luther to include a reformation of the understanding of “vocation.” While vocation during Luther’s time referred primarily (if not exclusively) to those

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called to religious service—those called “away from the world” to serve God—Luther redefined vocation as those called *to the world* in order to serve God and God’s world. That service is particularly directed toward those who are in need, those suffering and lacking power (or privilege).

It is within this context of vocation as representing a call to the world in order to serve God and God’s world—especially those suffering and lacking privilege—that I want to explore key words in the theme of this issue of *Intersections*.

## Defining Key Terms

While *diversity*, *inclusion*, and *equity* are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. Being able to distinguish meaning is crucial. When we don’t disambiguate the terms and then understand how they interact with one another, we can’t set clear goals and strategies around each. Before defining these terms, however, we should do the same with *privilege*.

### **Privilege**

I define privilege as *a special advantage granted or available to a particular person or group of people that results in an inequitable disadvantage experienced by others*. The last part of this definition is crucial because people will often equate measures designed to correct inequities to measures giving “privilege” to those who suffer inequities. For example, some people try to argue that measures designed to correct racial disparities in higher education give “privilege” to those who experience negative racial disparities. This is incorrect because corrective measures designed to eliminate the negative racial disparities experienced by black and brown people do not result in

an inequitable disadvantage being experienced by white people. Corrective measures do not award “privilege” that results in an “inequitable disadvantage” for other groups of people. Corrective measures actually seek to eliminate inequitable group disadvantages.

We live in a society where special advantages available to men results in inequitable disadvantages being experienced by women. None of the current corrective measures (including the “Equal Rights Amendment,” which has yet to be ratified even though it was passed by Congress in 1972) will result in an inequitable disadvantage experienced by men. We live in a society where special advantages available to cisgender heteronormative people results in inequitable disadvantages experienced by people who do not conform to binary, cisgender, heteronormative expectations. We live in a society where special advantages available to white people results in inequitable disadvantages experienced by black and brown people. Correcting these disadvantages should not be considered awarding “privilege.” In none of these corrective measures do the dominant groups/populations end up experiencing inequitable disadvantages.

### **Diversity**

Diversity is the presence of “difference” within a given setting. It includes all the ways in which people differ. While it might seem obvious, it is important to understand that diversity is about a collective or a group and can only exist in relationship to others. An individual is not diverse. He or she might be unique, but not diverse. Certain identities may bring diversity to your institution, but they in and of themselves are not diverse. They’re a woman; they’re a person of color; they’re part of the LGBTQIA+ community. They may possess multiple and societally opposing intersectional identities (all which contribute to their uniqueness), but one person by himself or herself does not equal diversity. Equating one person with diversity often results in tokenism. Diversity occurs in a collective that exhibits measurable difference across that collective.

Since diversity refers primarily to “difference” often measured across dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious affiliation, political beliefs, and other ideologies, many (if not most) of our institutions can in one

way or another be considered “diverse.” And yet, we can and should here prioritize racial diversity. I believe when talking about diversity, it is crucial and important to explicitly identify what we mean by diversity. This is because diversity is often used as a euphemism. People will say, “We are working to diversify our campus” instead of, “We are working to ensure we have more faculty, staff, administrators, and students of color.”

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Stepping away from euphemisms requires us to be more specific and detailed in our goals, which can lead to more substantive and accurate conversations and strategies. One of the reasons I want to focus on racial diversity is to highlight the difference between diversity, inclusion, and equity. An organization or institution can be diverse in one area without being diverse in another. An organization or institution can be diverse without being inclusive. And an organization or institution can be diverse without being equitable.

### **Inclusion**

Inclusion is about people with different identities feeling and/or being valued, welcomed, and empowered to participate fully in the life and decision-making processes within an organization. I once read somewhere that diversity is being asked to the party, while inclusion is being asked to dance.

The mere presence of diversity does not mean everyone (particularly those with marginalized identities) will feel welcomed or valued. It doesn’t mean everyone will be given opportunities to contribute, grow, develop, and be who they are called to be. Inclusion is not an automatic consequence of diversity. You can spend a significant amount of time and money bringing a diverse collection of people to your campus without ever changing the environment—without creating an *ethos* where people can *be* who they truly are.

Campuses that experience negative persistence (or retention) among specific demographics (e.g. racial minorities, or members of the LGBTQIA+ community) are often guilty of improving diversity without improving inclusion. It’s not enough to have explicit strategies for increasing diversity without having specific strategies for increasing inclusion. We have to be willing to address the barriers (whatever they might be) that stand in the way of people with marginalized identities feeling a sense of welcome and belonging, of being empowered to experience full participation.

### **Equity**

Equity represents fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that prevent the full participation and inclusion of people who are often marginalized. Equity is an approach that ensures everyone has access to the same opportunities. Equity recognizes that advantages and barriers exist, and that, as a result, everyone does not start from the same place. Seeking equity involves developing processes that acknowledge unequal starting places and that seek to correct and address such imbalances by reducing disparate and unbalanced outcomes.

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Within higher education, people tend to be more comfortable with the language of *diversity* than of *equity* because *equity* highlights the role of overt and covert oppression embedded within our institutional practices, structures, and policies. Equity emphasizes *processes* that lead to *outcomes* of diversity and inclusion. We’re often much more comfortable stressing outcomes than we are with stressing processes. Stressing processes requires us to acknowledge our complicity in the problem. Implementing new processes

require us to challenge and change our beliefs and practices in ways that lead to the outcomes we say we want. We say we want diversity and inclusion, but often we want to preserve processes that hinder diversity and inclusion. We clamor for change but we want to continue doing things the way we've always done them.

## Equity and Racial Justice

I want to emphasize that race and racial justice are the focus of an equity *process* that leads to *outcomes* of diversity and inclusion. I believe all conversations regarding diversity, inclusion, and equity—especially within higher education—need to be explicit in foregrounding race and racial justice as part of the conversation. According to the online Racial Equity Tools Glossary, racial justice is “the proactive reinforcement of policies, practices, attitudes and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts and outcomes for all” (“Racial Equity”).

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It is critical within higher education to adopt a racial justice understanding of equity—especially as it relates to outcomes. While I am not suggesting that conversations regarding diversity, inclusion, and equity be limited to issues of racial justice, I do believe such conversations need to be explicit in foregrounding issues of racial justice.

How often do our institutional plans for equity and inclusion explicitly mention race, racism, and racial justice? We know most of our academic institutions were created primarily to serve white students and white faculty. How then could we ever address diversity, inclusion, and equity without explicitly talking about race, racism, and racial justice?

Unfortunately, many of us are often uncomfortable and/or unwilling to explicitly talk about race, racism, and racial justice. As Robin DiAngelo asserts, much of the difficulty

white people (and therefore white institutions) have with talking about race, racism, and racial justice is connected to the issue of “white fragility.” According to DiAngelo, white fragility is a discomfort and defensiveness experienced by white people when confronted with information about racial inequities and injustice.

There are essentially two reasons why most white people get uncomfortable talking about racism. One reason is because they don't know how to talk about these issues and they're afraid of being criticized for saying something wrong. Yet there is an entire corpus of literature written on how to talk about race. White people who truly want to become better at talking about race need to make the effort to read and learn rather than feeling sorry for themselves when they're corrected for making inappropriate comments.

The second reason many white people get uncomfortable talking about racism and racial justice is because they've bought into the false and naïve notion that they are “colorblind” and that race is a social construct and therefore not real. While race is indeed a social construct for which there is no biological basis, race and racism are social realities.

Anyone who says when they look at me they don't see a black man, that person is lying. If I went on a shooting rampage and then fled, every white person present would describe me to the police as a black man. No one would tell the police, “Well, officer, you know... I didn't really see his color.”

People who claim to be colorblind falsely equate *seeing* blackness with thinking negatively about blackness. Which, when you think about it, shows how deeply ingrained racism and racial bias actually are. Because we've been conditioned to think negatively about blackness, the only way to avoid the negative connotations associated with blackness is to convince ourselves we don't see blackness. If we experienced positive connotations associated with blackness, we'd gladly embrace *seeing* blackness. When white people look at me, I don't want them not to see my color, I want them not to have negative connotations associated with my color.

When white people learn to do this, they will be much more comfortable talking about race, racism, and racial justice. They will also be much more capable of developing

effective institutional policies and practices that promote diversity, inclusion, and equity.

While I am vehemently opposed to the notion of a color-blind society, I tend to think many people operating with a colorblind approach to life are actually good-intentioned people, who care about issues of equity and inclusion. They're operating within the ideal that all people are equal and should be treated equally. The problem, however, is that the ideal is not reflective of our social reality. The real life status of people in the world is not one of equality.

Treating people equally, when they do not possess equal status, simply maintains and reproduces existing inequalities. The real-life status of black and brown people in America is not one of equality with white people. So attempts to bring about racial equity cannot treat black and brown people as though their social status is equal to white people.

Advocating for racial equity and racial justice can often be difficult because people fail to recognize the difference between equity and equality. Furthermore, some academics associate the terms *racial equity* and *racial justice* with activism and advocacy, and then argue that academic institutions are supposed to be "neutral and objective."

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Higher education, however, has never been in the business of neutrality. Institutions have always taken stances. Luther College proudly takes an advocacy stance regarding climate change and environmental sustainability. Martin Luther's 95 Theses were about taking a stance. The Reformation was about taking a stance. The question is: Are we willing to be explicit regarding where we stand with our commitment to promoting racial equity and racial justice?

As I mentioned previously, we are often much more comfortable talking about diversity and inclusion than we are with talking about equity. When we do talk about

equity in the context of racial inequities, we often have varying opinions regarding the underlying causes of racial inequities.

While few Americans actually deny the existence of racial disparities in America, there are often various reasons given for the existence of racial disparities. Echoing the sentiment of Ibram X. Kendi, a *New York Times* best-selling author and the founding director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University, data show that racial disparities are the direct result of racist practices and policies—*especially* when we fail to recognize the many ways in which such practices and policies are racist (Kendi).

"We tend to focus on 'helping' minority students and faculty, as though they are the reason for racial disparities, rather than addressing and changing our racist practices and policies."

Often when addressing racial disparities at our institutions, we tend to focus on racialized minorities rather than on racist practices and policies. We tend to focus on "helping" minority students and faculty, as though they are the reason for racial disparities, rather than addressing and changing our racist practices and policies.

While many people working at predominantly white colleges and universities will make comments like, "We want more racial minority students admitted," or, "We want more racial minority faculty hired," very few are willing to acknowledge that their personal and institutional values, preferences, practices, and policies actually reproduce whiteness and are the primary cause of racial inequities.

Too often I hear colleagues say things like minorities don't apply or they are not interested in relocating to rural Iowa, or minority faculty are so scarce that they are being offered "better jobs" elsewhere. The data, however, do not support such claims ("Race and Ethnicity"). College and university recruitment and hiring committees will frequently make racialized others responsible for the

existence of racial disparities on their campuses while rarely considering the racial disparities to be the result of how they go about recruiting and hiring or how their racial beliefs about “quality,” “competence,” and “fit” contribute to the racial disparities on their campuses.

The reduction of racial disparities requires adopting what the Center for Urban Education calls “equity-mindedness.” Equity-mindedness refers to *actions* that demonstrate individuals’ capacity to recognize and address racialized structures, policies, and practices that produce and sustain racial inequities (“What is Equity-Mindedness?”). While we frequently talk about the lack of racial diversity on our campuses, our actions (or lack thereof) rarely focus on how we are actually responsible for the racial disparities that exist on our campuses.

“Equity-mindedness refers to *actions* that demonstrate individuals’ capacity to recognize and address racialized structures, policies, and practices that produce and sustain racial inequities.”

It reminds me of a sculpture by the Danish sculptor and activist, Jens Galschiot. The sculpture, entitled, *Survival of the Fattest*, is of Lady Justice depicted as an obese woman from the West sitting on the shoulders of a starved African man.<sup>1</sup> The sculpture illustrates that when addressing oppression (especially oppression dealing with race, gender, and sexual orientation), we’ll often claim a willingness to do “anything” we can to help, *except* seriously examining and giving up the oppressive beliefs, practices, and policies that privilege us.

If we are serious about moving beyond privilege by engaging diversity, inclusion, and equity, then we have to be intentional in using whatever privilege we possess

in ways that avoid the *perils* of privilege by challenging privilege and pursuing the *promise* of privilege.

## Endnotes

1. For images and the artist’s reflections, see [www.galschiot.com/survival-of-the-fattest](http://www.galschiot.com/survival-of-the-fattest).

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