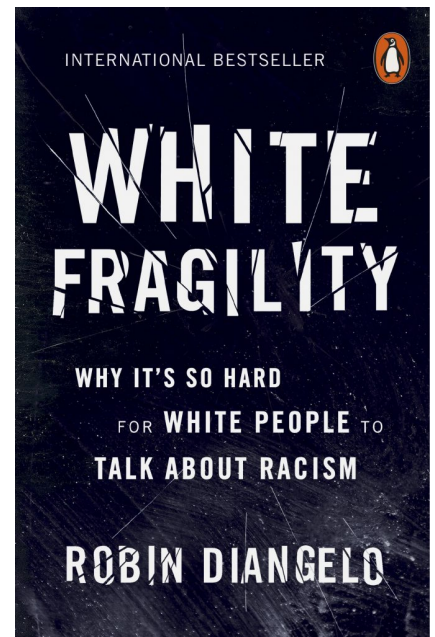


Review: White Fragility – Part 3a: Pursuing a dynamic of resolve – religious resonance

This is the beginning of the third part of a multi-part review of Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility*. The topic of discussion is systemic racism and, in particular, the collective blindness of white people towards their racial bias. In my first part ([link](#)) I explored DiAngelo's observations by analogy with the phenomenon of classism. In the second part ([link](#)) I explored my own racial ignorance as a white person. DiAngelo does well to describe the *problem* of white fragility. In this part I am moving towards a focus on the question of "What we do in response?" This will be the subject of my final post. I am not looking for a quick easy-fix, but aspiring to a dynamic of resolve towards white people owning their part in the world in which we live.



Part 3a – Religious resonance

DiAngelo does well. It's hard to articulate a problem in a context beset by blindness. She's persistent, and holds our nose to it until we can smell it. It can be an unpleasant experience, but it's honest, and useful. But what does she imagine as a way forward?

At one level, it is obvious. DiAngelo is keen for white people

to engage with “cross-racial skill building” (page 7), and hopes for when feedback about “our unaware yet inevitable racism” might be “graciously received” (page 113). I can certainly get on board with that aspiration; emotional honesty and humility are graspable virtues! The guidelines she, herself, attempts to follow (page 125) are instructive for anyone in a position of power and privilege. Her own experience of “owning” her racism (page 145) is a demonstration of emotionally honest, humble, relational living. If only these were more prevalent! I want more of this in myself. I want more of this in the communities and churches in which I participate and lead!

What DiAngelo describes in her hoped-for response reflects aspects of what I might call “confession” and “grace.” The one who is at fault, owns the problem, and doesn’t deflect. The one who is harmed, in a context of freedom, may offer a gift of illumination and help increase understanding. “Having racist assumptions is inevitable (but possible to change), I will feel gratitude when an unaware racist assumption is pointed out...” (page 132). I need this. We all need this. If this is all that eventuates from books like this, that alone would be significant, and good!

My aim here, however, is to look a little deeper. To do that I am going to do my best to bring a Christian theological lens to bear. There will be some positive resonance, as well as some differences. However, before I proceed further, I need to recognise – and hopefully disclaim – a real phenomenon: I am becoming aware of how phrases such as “biblical worldview” and even “Christian” can intertwine with the exact forms of white privilege that DiAngelo has illuminated. Christianity has often (but far from always) played the part of the white man’s religion, and its forms have been used to sustain and justify segregation and white supremacy, just as DiAngelo has described. Even the beautiful eschatological vision of an ethnically diverse renewed humanity caught up together in

eternal worship can be misused; "We are all one in Christ!" is over-realised eschatology, and harmful, when that unity is not actually present in the present. Is the truth and certainty of ultimate renewal grounds for ignoring present sin? *me genoito!* Certainly not!

The Christian worldview can be perverted by whiteness, and my hope of disclaiming that is this: I sit at the brown-skinned feet of a crucified-and-risen man, reading the Scriptures that he read, upheld, and fulfilled. Within those pages I encounter and aspire to pathways of truth first walked by slaves, excluded women, African eunuchs, all manner of people who do not look like me. In the contemporary world I have received more spiritual food from the hermeneutics of black revivalism than the culturally-appropriating white-washed liberalism of the dominant ecclesial paradigm. I am far from fully sanctified, but this I know: Christian spirituality is not only a valid voice to hear, but a source of wisdom, more ancient, more universal, than any other perspective I've ever encountered. Moreover, it has a mystic ability to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and do the deep work beyond what we can ask or imagine. In its truest form, it is exactly what is needed to give sight to the racially blind.

The Biblical witness often harmonises with DiAngelo's position. Sometimes this is *against* the rhetoric of those who might claim a "Biblical worldview" but are actually far from it. For instance, an absolutist individualism is *not* biblical. DiAngelo posits a sense of both *collective guilt* and *individual complicity*: We aren't just "handed" our privilege as white people, the "systematic dimensions of racism... must be actively and passively, consciously and unconsciously, maintained" (page 64). The individual can't just simply deflect on to the collective; it is wrong to "exempt the person from any responsibility for or participation in the problem." (page 78). This is not a foreign theme in the Biblical narrative.

The Old Testament writings, especially, interweave that sense of systemic injustice into the deeper sense of idolatry and rebellion against the heart of God. Amongst myriad examples is the prophet Amos (5:14) who cries, "Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is." That evil is not just individual moralism, it's against the "fat cows of Bashan" (Amos 4:1) who "make it hard to the poor." His summary introduction is against *Israel collectively* who "deny justice to the oppressed" (Amos 2:7). The prophetic injunction is to a *people* – usually *God's people* – not just to individual persons. My few short words here are not enough to express it – go and read the Bible! But heed the heart of God that is revealed. God responds to collective as well as individual guilt. He will even broken-heartedly take his people, collectively, into exile, because of their unrepented injustice, and so seek a change in their heart and their ways. The Western church should take heed!

We *can* conceive of a people, experiencing systemic harm, crying out to God, "How long, oh Lord? Remember *us!*". We *can* conceive of him hearing, and heeding. There are some deep, deep expressions of this in the history of the black gospel movements. It is thoroughly biblical.

Moreover, God's gracious gospel invitation, in Jesus, is to belong as an individual to a unified collective. This is most profoundly expressed by the image of a "body" – a diversity of members in a dynamic whole. St. Paul, especially, uses this image (see 1 Corinthians 12), He expresses it in a way that upturns the normal social defaults of his day. The gospel invites us into this common-union and this invitation is not a matter of affirmed privilege, but a belonging-to-one-another life of kenotic (self-emptying) transformation.

DiAngelo's sense of collective guilt, and privileged complicity, therefore, should not offend us Christians. It's part of our worldview. When exploring ourselves racially, we

would do well to pray, together, along with the psalmist, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-4). Or is that only about acceptably-white personal trespasses like drinking alcohol and fornicating?

Indeed, in my mind, the Biblical voices are more consistent than DiAngelo herself. This is certainly the case when it comes to grasping the concept of "guilt". DiAngelo appropriately uses this language, e.g. "Anti-blackness comes from deep *guilt* about what we have done and continue to do; the unbearable knowledge of our complicity with the profound torture of black people from past to present" (page 94, emphasis mine). Given that, it is utterly incongruous that towards the end of the book, she refuses the language for herself: "... I have a racist worldview, deep racial bias, racist patterns, and investments in the racist system that has elevated me. Still, *I don't feel guilty* about racism. I didn't chose [sic] this socialization, and it could not be avoided. But I am responsible for my role in it. to the degree that I have done my best in each moment to interrupt my participation, I can rest with a clearer conscience..." (page 149, emphasis mine). Perhaps, at this point, she is simply using it as a descriptor of emotion, i.e. "guilty feelings." Nevertheless, her entire book has revolved around an honesty about guilt, but, here, at the end she steps herself back and couches it in terms of self-justifying attempts at a clear conscience. "I've done my best" – isn't that a deflection?

The thing is, I don't think this undermines her argument. Like all of us, DiAngelo is fragile when faced with being counted as guilty. I don't disparage her for it. The Biblical voices are well-used to this phenomenon. A common objection to the gospel is the ever-present retort: "I don't need anyone's forgiveness, I've done my best!" In this way the gospel is more consistent than DiAngelo; the gospel will not let us

ignore our complicity and guilt in the fracture of this world, including it's systems of injustice and pain. It will not even let us deflect towards our own good efforts. "All have fallen short", Paul famously says (Romans 3:23).

The Biblical voice is also more robust than DiAngelo when it comes to *shame*. This a complex issue and there are two interwoven senses to understand. Firstly, shaming can be a malicious act of "othering" someone to diminish them and exercise power over them. But, secondly, someone can be "ashamed" in a healthy way, when they become aware not only of acting wrongly but having a *propensity* to act wrongly – i.e. that wrongness is in their character somehow. The gospel, literally, is about God entering into, inhabiting, and transforming our shame. It therefore relies on this second, honest, transformative sense. The gospel is rejected, however, when it is perceived in the first sense; when it is perceived as a malicious power-play, shame triggers our fragility, and we respond in defense. **It is absolutely evident, in *White Fragility*, DiAngelo is shaming white people,** because there *is* guilt and we *do* have a propensity to perpetuate the systemic injustice! I believe she is doing so with the transformative intent, but she is encountering the defenses of the other perception.

The Biblical voice *affirms* the possibility of white fragility. And why not? After all, we Christians have a deep heritage in studying sin! I may speak, theologically, of "original sin," or of an innate propensity to act selfishly and unjustly as part of our broken human community; I might even call this "depravity." DiAngelo speaks of "habitus", an interplay of free will and societal structures which maintains our comfort and equilibrium (page 103). I then might speak of the "heart being deceitful" (Jeremiah 17:9). Surely these concepts are not foreign to each other?

In fact, as a professional sin-studier, I might dare to offer a little advice: One of the critiques of DiAngelo's approach,

in the sense that it doesn't *help* white people talk about racism, is her imprecision with regard to sin. I see this in her use of loaded terms like "white supremacy" applied almost indiscriminately. It's a term that connotes overt acts of violence and assault. Yet, applied to broadly, it would also cover lesser sins such as a mildly-negligent use of racist idiom in a conversation. This doesn't excuse either act, but it is unhelpfully imprecise. I get that she's pushing towards a common root of systemic white superiority, and that is appropriate. But we Christians do that too, and we have learned the limits of it. Our word "sin" also has a broad semantic range, grounded in a common root, and it also can be applied to anything from the cruel, malicious, literally diabolic oppressions of human empire, through to the complex inclinations of an otherwise innocent thought life. I've reflected it on that previously, and have suggested that we needed adjustments in our phraseology in order to communicate our intent, open the door to repentance and change, and not trigger misunderstanding and defensiveness. We don't want to *ignore* sin and shame, but we also actually want to *break* the shame-cycle, not reinforce it.

Nevertheless, the Biblical voice does recognise the times when the root cause of sin needs to be revealed. DiAngelo uses a big stick, and it's likely warranted. Jesus himself, tired of the religious deflections and excuses of his day, also uses amplification to uncover what is hidden and persistent: "You have heard it said, do not murder... but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.." (Matthew 5:21). You can't hide behind "done my best" and "I'm not a racist", you must examine the heart and the root of the matter.

There is much that resonates between DiAngelo and the Biblical voice. But there is some discord also, particularly at the ideological level. DiAngelo has wisdom and insight, but the Biblical voices, in the end, offer more hope and a clearer way

forward. This will be the subject of the final part of my engagement with *White Fragility*.