

# Christian Privilege and the Promotion of “Secular” and Not-So “Secular” Mainline Christianity in Public Schooling and in the Larger Society

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Using the conceptual organizers of Young’s (1990) “faces of oppression,” and Hardiman and Jackson’s (1997) “levels of oppression,” this essay investigates the concept of domination and subordination, Christian privilege, and the subtle and not-so subtle promotion of Christianity in public schooling and in the larger United States society. The author explores a number of areas related to Christian privilege and religious oppression, and provides a historical foundation to illustrate the roots and legacies of Christian hegemony and privilege within a United States context.

## DOMINATION AND SUBORDINATION

**A**s spring peers forth from the soil and tree limbs, the annual Easter egg roll, sponsored by the President of the United States and the First Lady, thrills elementary and preschool age children each year. Also, in school classrooms throughout the country, students and their teachers dip hardboiled eggs into brightly colored dyes, and display Easter eggs of pink, yellow, blue, green, red, and lavender. Some students adhere bunny, baby chick, rainbow, or angel decals to their Easter eggs. Some paint flowers or clouds; some sprinkle glitter of silver or gold. An excitement wafts through the classroom as students imagine sharing their treasures with parents or caregivers, as teachers reward the good work of their charges with delicious gleaming chocolate bunnies. A palpable excitement fills the air in anticipation of Easter Sunday as children adorn classroom bulletin boards with images of the season.

Many people (most likely the majority) consider these events, played out in Washington, DC and in some schools in the United States, as normal, appropriate, and joyous seasonal activities. Upon critical reflection, however, others experience them as examples of institutional (governmental and educational) (re)enforcements of dominant Christian standards and what is referred to as “Christian privilege,” though presented in presumably secularized forms. They represent some of the ways in which the dominant group (in this instance, Christians) reiterates its values and practices while marginaliz-

ing and subordinating those who do not adhere to Christian faith traditions.

Based on Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) pioneering investigations of white and male privilege, we can, by analogy, understand Christian privilege as constituting a seemingly invisible, unearned, and largely unacknowledged array of benefits accorded to Christians, with which they often unconsciously walk through life as if effortlessly carrying a knapsack tossed over their shoulders. This *system* of benefits confers dominance on Christians while subordinating members of other faith communities as well as non-believers. These systemic inequities are pervasive throughout the society. They are encoded into the individual’s consciousness and woven into the fabric of our social institutions, resulting in a stratified social order privileging dominant (“agent”) groups while restricting and disempowering subordinate (“target”) groups (Bell, 1997; Miller, 1976). In keeping with McIntosh’s (1988) inventory outlining the manifestations of white privilege, authors have developed parallel lists summarizing overarching examples of Christian privilege (see e.g., Clark, Vargas, Schlosser, & Alimo, 2002; Schlosser, 2003). Clark et al. (2002) assert:

The fact remains that all Christians benefit from Christian privilege regardless of the way they express themselves as Christians in the same way that all White people benefit from White privilege. (¶4)

As there is a spectrum of Christian denominations and traditions, so too is there a hierarchy or continuum of Christian privilege based on (1) historical factors, (2) numbers of practitioners, and (3) degrees of social

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power. In this regard, in a United States context, though the gap in privilege between Christian denominations is apparently shrinking, white Protestant denominations may still have some greater degrees of Christian privilege, relative to some minority Christian denominations, for example, African American and Latino/a churches, Amish, Mennonites, Quakers, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, adherents to Christian Science, and to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and in some quarters, to Catholics.

The concept of "hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971) describes the ways in which the dominant group, in this case Christians in general and predominantly Protestants, successfully disseminate dominant social realities and social visions in a manner accepted as common sense, as "normal," as universal—even though only an estimated 30% of the world's inhabitants are Christian (Smith & Harter, 2002)—and as representing part of the natural order, even at times by those who are marginalized, disempowered, or rendered invisible by it (Tong, 1989). This religious hegemony maintains the marginality of already marginalized religions, faiths, and spiritual communities. According to Beaman (2003), "the binary opposition of sameness/difference is reflected in Protestant/minority religion in which mainstream Protestantism is representative of the 'normal'" (p. 321).

The form of hegemony examined in this discussion is Christian hegemony, which I define as the overarching system of advantages bestowed on Christians. It is the institutionalization of a Christian norm or standard, which establishes and perpetuates the notion that all people are or should be Christian, thereby privileging Christians and Christianity, and excluding the needs, concerns, religious cultural practices, and life experiences of people who are not Christian. At times subtle, Christian hegemony is oppression by neglect, omission, erasure, and distortion (Blumenfeld, 2000).

Hegemony is advanced through discourses (Foucault, 1980), which include the ideas, written expressions, theoretical foundations, and language of the dominant culture. These are implanted within networks of social and political control, described by Foucault as "regimes of truth" (p. 133), which function to legitimize what can be said, who has the authority to speak and be heard, and what is authorized as true or as *the* truth. (Kreisberg, 1992, Bell, 1997).

However we conceptualize diversity, religious groups on the margins are not taken seriously in social surveys. Protestantism, and to some extent Catholicism, are constructed as the normal against which the "other" is established. (Beaman, 2003, p. 313)

The concept of oppression, then, constitutes more than the cruel and repressive actions of individuals upon others. It involves an overarching system of differentials of social power and privilege by dominant groups over sub-

ordinated groups based on ascribed social identities and reinforced by unequal social group status. And this is not merely the case in societies ruled by coercive or tyrannical leaders; it also occurs within the day-to-day practices of contemporary democratic societies, such as the United States (Young, 1990). "Unpacking" the knapsack of privilege (whether it be Christian, white, male, heterosexual, owning class, temporarily able bodied, English as first-language speakers, and others) is to become aware and to develop critical consciousness of its existence and how it impacts the daily lives of both those with and those without this privilege.

This essay examines the dynamics of Christian privilege and religious oppression (domination and subordination) of minority religious groups and non-believers in the United States. I investigate Christian privilege as well as religious oppression, for I perceive the two in symbiotic relationship: oppression toward non-Christians gives rise to Christian privilege in the United States, and Christian privilege maintains oppression toward non-Christian individuals and faith communities. Throughout my investigation, I deploy as my theoretical and conceptual frameworks two models that have been developed to examine the component parts and the levels and types of social privilege, devaluation, domination, and subordination. The first of these is Iris Marion Young's (1990) taxonomy looking at privilege and oppression as involving a constellation of conditions divided into five categories (or "faces") that include powerlessness, exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence. The second theoretical organizer I use was developed by Rita Hardiman and Bailey Jackson (1997) to investigate the ways in which societal privilege and oppression are constructed and maintained on overlapping and coexisting societal/cultural, institutional, and individual levels. In addition, I situate the essay upon a historical foundation to illustrate the roots and legacies of a Protestant, leading to a larger Christian hegemony and privilege within dominant U.S. legal and social policies, practices, and beliefs.

## THE "FACES" OF OPPRESSION

Many overt forms of oppression are obvious when a dominant group tyrannizes a subordinate group; the horrendous treatment of people of color under the system of apartheid in South Africa and of black Africans in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the mass slaughter of Jews and other stigmatized minorities in Nazi Germany, and the merciless killing of Muslims during the Christian "Crusades" are prime examples. Many forms of oppression (and dominant group privilege), however, are not as apparent, especially to members of dominant groups. Oppression in its fullest sense also refers to structural/systemic constraints imposed on groups

even within constitutional democracies, and “its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules” (Young, 1990, p. 36). As noted above, Young places these forms of oppression and privilege under five overarching categories or “faces” of powerlessness, exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence. The following section adapts Young’s taxonomy to investigate the concept of Christian privilege and religious oppression in the United States.

### Powerlessness

Subordinated groups have less social power than members of dominant groups to engage in the decision-making process that affects the course of their lives or even to name the terms of their existence. “The powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them. . . and they rarely command respect” (Young, 1990, p. 43).

Religious powerlessness has its historical foundations in the colonial period. The spiritual beliefs that were foundational to the numerous indigenous tribes originally inhabiting the vast territories now known as the United States of America were seriously challenged with the advent of European expansionism to North America in the 17th century of the Common Era (CE)<sup>1</sup>, as many settlers brought with them their forms of Christianity. The Pilgrims, for example, who left England for Massachusetts in 1620, originally had strong connections with the Church of England, but they were disenchanted with what they viewed as the church’s compromises with Roman Catholicism (Lippy, 2004). The Pilgrims came to North America with hopes of establishing a purer form of Protestant Christianity than they had found in their native land. These “Puritans” separated from the Church of England to establish their own religious institutions, but they were not interested or willing to extend to others the religious freedom they were seeking (Lippy, 2004).

The Pilgrims believed that they were a divinely chosen people, and soon established “a biblical commonwealth” (Eck, 2001, p. 36) crafted from their own form of Christianity in which “the church and the state were to support and protect each other” (Corbett & Corbett, 1999, p. 33).

Over the decades after the Puritans first landed on the shores of North America came other nationalities and religious denominations, primarily Christian, from the European continent. These largely included Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Dutch Reformed, Congregationalist Puritans, and Baptists (Lippy, 2004). In their attempts to assure religious freedom for themselves, under the leadership of William Penn, Quakers founded the colony of Pennsylvania, and Roman Catholics founded Maryland in the 1640s. In the follow-

ing decades, however, Protestants established political power in Maryland, and in 1704, Protestant legislators passed a law unequivocally titled “An Act to Prevent the Growth of Popery within This Province” banishing Jesuits from the territory (Eck, 2001).

Adherents to a number of non-Christian religions were scattered throughout the colonies, though they were persecuted, stripped of their beliefs, and at times killed by a colonial Protestant establishment staunchly resistant to any diversity of religious belief or expression within its borders. Though some of the first Africans to arrive on the land that would later be called the United States came over as explorers accompanying Spanish and Portuguese explorers in North and South America, and as “free men” and as indentured servants who, after serving for a specified time, would gain their freedom, primarily Africans were forcibly brought over against their will as permanent slaves. Some of these slaves were Muslims, though slave owners deculturalized them, stripping them of their religious foundations, their language, and other cultural expressions.

Examples of the powerlessness of subordinated religious groups did not end with the colonial period. As recently as the middle-20th century, shortly after the U.S.’s entry into World War II, the government, in a mass relocation effort, interned over 112,000 Japanese Americans, many of them Buddhist, in concentration camps located far from their homes (Spring, 2004). Many of these incarcerated Japanese were U.S. citizens, born and living in this country for years. Government officials confiscated their homes, stores, and other property and suspended their personal rights. Though the United States was at war with Japan, Germany, and Italy, it was only Japanese Americans who were singled out for such treatment. It was not until early 1945 that the Supreme Court ordered an end to the internment, and former internees were given the right to sue the government for restitution for losses and suffering (Zinn, 1980).

### Exploitation

Young (1990) views the major feature of exploitation, another of her “faces” of oppression, as “a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another” (p. 39). People of color, women, and young and old people consistently have been among the social groups exploited by an economic and social system dominated by a white Christian male power structure.

In colonial America, as private farms grew larger and farmers needed more cheap laborers to cultivate the land and tend the crops, many white settlers came voluntarily from England and served initially as indentured servants. In order to increase productivity and profitability, landowners turned increasingly to the slave trade

for their labor. Race and religion were intertwined as bases for slavery in the Americas where “heathen” black Africans were stolen from their homelands and forced into slavery for the remainder of their lives (Takaki, 1993), carried by slave ships, some of which were named the “Jesus,” the “Grace of God,” the “Angel,” the “Liberty,” and the “Justice” (Clifton, 1994; Norman, 2005). Many slave ships had on board a Christian minister to help oversee the passage. In fact, it was not uncommon at this time for religious representatives to offer scriptural justifications for slavery (Hill & Cheadle, 1996).

The issue of slavery became a lightning rod in the 1840s among members of The Baptist General Convention, and in May 1845, 310 delegates from the Southern states convened in Augusta, Georgia, to organize a separate Southern Baptist Convention on a pro-slavery plank. One-hundred and fifty years later, in June 1995, the Southern Baptist Convention officially apologized to African Americans for its support and collusion with the institution of slavery (regarding it now as an “original sin”), and also apologizing for its rejection of civil rights initiative of the 1950s and 1960s (Hill & Cheadle, 1996).

The expansion of the republic and movement west was in part justified by an overriding philosophical underpinnings since the American Revolution. Called “Manifest Destiny,” it was based on the belief that God intended the United States to extend its holdings and its power across the wide continent of North America over the native Indian tribes from the east coast to the west (Spring, 2004).

The doctrine of “manifest destiny” embraced a belief in American Anglo-Saxon superiority. . . . “This continent,” a congressman declared, “was intended by Providence as a vast theatre on which to work out the grand experiment of Republican government, under the auspices of the Anglo-Saxon race.” (quoted in Takaki, 1993, p. 176)

During the early years of the new republic, with its increasing population and desire for land, political leaders, such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, advocated that Indian lands should be obtained through treaties and purchase. President Jefferson in 1803 wrote a letter to then Tennessee political leader, Andrew Jackson, advising him to convince Indians to sell their “useless” forests to the U.S. government and become farmers (Takaki, 1993). Jefferson and other government leaders overlooked the fact that this style of individualized farming was contrary to Indian communitarian spiritual/cultural traditions.

Later, however, when he inhabited the White House, Jackson argued that white settlers had a “right” to confiscate Indian land. Though he proposed a combination of treaties and an exchange or trade of land, he maintained that whites had a right to claim any Indian lands that were not under cultivation. Essentially, Jackson rec-

ognized as the only legitimate claims for Indian lands those on which they grew crops or made other “improvements” (Spring, 2004). The Indian Removal Act of May 28, 1830 authorized President Jackson to confiscate Indian land east of the Mississippi River, “relocate” its former inhabitants, and exchange their former land with territory west of the River. The infamous “Trail of Tears” during Jackson’s presidency attests to the forced evacuation and redeployment of entire Indian nations in which many died of cholera, exposure to the elements, contaminated food, and other environmental hazards.

### Marginalization

Marginalization is the process whereby entire categories of people—in the following examples, non-Protestant Christians—are restricted from meaningful involvement in the social life of the community and of the nation, and thus subjected to acute economic deprivation and even annihilation. Young (1990) defines “marginals” as, “people the system of labor cannot or will not use” (p. 41).

The media constitute a major societal and institutional means of transmitting religious norms and beliefs, while maintaining the marginalization of the “other.” According to Beaman (2003):

New religious movements attract media attention for apocalyptic views and actions, and remain “cults” in public discourse. Muslims are the subject of biased media reports that seem to result in attacks on mosques and anti-Muslim sentiment. Aboriginals, for whom daily life and the physical world are inseparable from spirituality, are constructed as “problematic” because of their demands for equality and restitution. (p. 315)

Schools are another institutional means by which social norms are maintained and reproduced. Norms of Christian privilege and marginalization of members of other faith communities and non-believers in the schools are conveyed by curricular materials (curricular hegemony), which focus upon heroes, holidays, traditions, accomplishments, and the importance of a European-heritage, Christian experience. Sonia Nieto (1998) labels this as the “monocultural” school, in which school structures, policies, curricula, instructional materials, and even pedagogical strategies (comprising hegemonic discourses) are primarily representative of only the dominant religious culture. Students who are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Jewish, and of other faiths, and non-believers, for example, see few of their perspectives and few, if any, people who look like them, people who believe as they believe, or people who adhere to the cultural expressions that they adhere to introduced and discussed in their classroom lessons.

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you . . . when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. (Rich, 1986, p. 199)

When other than dominant perspectives are included, it is often done so in what James Banks (2004) refers to as the “Contributions Approach” when very little emphasis is given to the meanings and importance of these cultural elements within the communities in which they exist. With this approach, the mainstream curriculum remains basically unchanged.

In addition, the school calendar is organized to meet the needs of many of the Christian faith communities, while marginalizing others. Examples include Jewish students who are compelled to request an excuse from school to attend religious services for their “High Holy Days” on and between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipper, which usually fall during the beginning of the academic year. In addition, Jehovah’s Witnesses, who do not celebrate holidays—religious or otherwise—must also seek permission to be excused from the observance of holidays in school. (Jehovah’s Witnesses, while a Christian denomination, are often marginalized within Christianity, and not accorded the same degree of Christian privilege as members of other so-called “mainstream” Christian faith communities.)

Muslim students, faculty, and staff often are not accorded the opportunity to have a safe prayer space on campus to perform the salat (prayer), as required by the Five Pillars of Islam. A case in point involved a 17-year-old high school junior in Ohio, who was barred by school administrators from praying in an empty classroom at lunch and before and after class hours. Though a 1963 U.S. Supreme Court case ruled unconstitutional any *mandatory* prayers or Bible readings at public schools, subsequent rulings declared the constitutionality of many forms of personal religious expression on school campuses. In this case, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) stepped in on the student’s behalf, and convinced the school district to reverse its policy (WorldNetDaily, 2006).

Marginalization also affects faculty and staff in hiring and other policies. Following a class discussion on religion in education, a student in my required preservice multicultural education course contacted me and stated that though the discussion held great interest for her, she feared that she could not participate because in doing so, she might disclose that she identifies as Pagan. She feared that if this were known, she would most likely be prevented from securing employment as a teacher in our state’s public schools. Her fears related to the implicit religious criteria used for public school employment.

What can be the effects of marginalization on students in our schools who are not taught their history or

do not see role models representing their religious communities, or on individuals in the larger society from religious traditions other than Christian or on non-believers? Schlosser’s (2003) answer is that “Christian religious dogmatism contributes to persons from minority religious groups feeling that their religious identity is not valued, and subsequently, they feel discriminated and oppressed because of their religious group membership” (p. 47). This marginalization can have very serious implications on individuals’ sense of self and on their identity development, for they begin to view themselves through the lens of the dominant group. When this occurs, victims of marginalization and systematic oppression are susceptible to the effects of internalized oppression, whereby they internalize, consciously or unconsciously, attitudes of inferiority or “otherness.” This internalization, created by oppression from the outside, plays itself out where it might seem “safe” to do so, mainly in two places: (1) on members of their own group, and (2) upon themselves. In the case of religious minorities, this can result in low self-esteem, shame, depression, hostility toward members of the dominant group, prejudiced attitudes towards members of their own religious community, and efforts to “pass” or to convert to membership in the dominant religion (Bartky, 1979; Fanon, 1968; Freire, 1970; Lipsky, 1977; Miller, 1976).

### Cultural Imperialism

Young (1990) states that “cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group’s experiences and culture, and its establishment as the norm” (p. 45). Dominant groups project and transmit their particular beliefs, values, and perspectives (through hegemonic discourses) thereby rendering subordinated groups virtually invisible while simultaneously constructing stereotypes about these groups.

The manifestations of Christian privilege as cultural imperialism are numerous. First, for all intents and purposes, the calendar, and specifically the school academic calendar, is scheduled around Christian holidays and celebrations. In fact, the Christian holiday of Christmas has been declared a national holiday in which most businesses and government offices are closed and services suspended.

Society marks time through a Christian lens. Even the language we use in reference to the mainstream calendar reflects Christian assumptions. A few years ago, with increasing rapidity, we heard and read of the coming of the “21st Century,” “The year 2000,” and the dawning of “The new millennium.” Among the definitions of “millennium” in *Merriam-Webster’s Eleventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (2003), definition #2a is: “a period of 1000 years” (p. 789). Let us not forget, however, that

the year 2000 is calculated with reference to the birth of Jesus, and it is therefore the beginning of the next *Christian* millennium. In fact, definition #1a in the same dictionary defines "millennium" as: "the thousand years mentioned in Revelation 20 during which holiness is to prevail and Christ is to reign on earth" (p. 789). This fact is brought home each time we hear someone mention the date followed by "in the year of our Lord, Jesus Christ." The century markers B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (anno Domini) are clearly Christian in origin. Therefore, the year 2000 is one important milepost, though, for many religious traditions, it also marks a heightening of their invisibility. There has been an attempt to decenter Christian hegemony in terminology related to the marking of time by replacing B.C. with B.C.E. (before the common era) and A.D. with C.E. (common era), although the renaming does not affect the marking of time before and after a "common" (Christian) era.

The work week is structured to allow Christians the opportunity to worship without conflicting with their work schedules. On the governmental level, a series of laws, the so-called "Blue Laws," for example, have been enacted and enforced throughout the United States, and some still remaining to the present day, restrict(ed) sales, business operations, recreational activities, and governmental services on Sunday, the Sabbath for most Christian denominations, thereby supporting or enforcing religious customs and practices of the dominate Christian denominations while imposing these practices on others, for example, Seventh Day Adventists and Jews who celebrate their Sabbaths on Saturday or Friday at sunset to Saturday at sunset. These laws date back to colonial times when Sunday church attendance was mandatory (Lippy, 2004). In fact, in 1816, a Jewish man named Abraham Wolf was convicted in Pennsylvania of the "crime" of "having done and performed worldly employment on the Lord's day" (Sunday). He appealed his sentence but lost (Dinnerstein, 1994).

In the schools, children or their parents or caretakers of other faiths must take responsibility to request accommodations from school officials either to be excused from ongoing school activities or to be absent to practice their religious traditions. For example, a Muslim elementary school student in central Iowa requested permission to attend the school library or to remain in her classroom for the duration of her lunch period during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in which it was her practice to fast from sunrise to sunset. The school, however, had a written policy mandating that students must be present in the cafeteria during their lunch breaks. After repeated discussions with the school principal, the mother of the student convinced him to allow her daughter to go to an alternate space during the month of Ramadan while the student's classmates were at lunch.

Other examples of Christian cultural imperialism are numerous: the promotion of music, especially Christ-

mas, by radio stations, and Christmas specials played on TV throughout November and December each year; Christmas decorations (often hung at taxpayer expense) in the public square in cities and towns throughout the United States; and the widespread availability of Christian holiday decorations, greeting cards, food, and other items during Christian holiday seasons (Schlosser, 2003).

One might ask whether the phrases "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance or "In God We Trust" on U.S. currency and *Annuet Coeptis* (He [God or Providence] has favored our undertakings) on the Great Seal of the United States and printed on the back of the one-dollar bill, or the teaching of "Intelligent Design" in some school districts, constitute examples of Christian cultural imperialism and Christian hegemony, and possibly also violate the First Amendment's "non-establishment" clause? Charles Thompson suggested the Latin motto *Annuet Coeptis* in 1782 when he designed the Great Seal (MacArthur, 2006). The phrase "under God" was added to the school Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 during the Cold War in reaction to what many saw as a godless Soviet Union attempting to impose its economic and political system throughout the world. In addition, though the framers of the Constitution kept religious terminology off the currency, during the American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln requested that "In God We Trust" be included on U.S. coins. This was added to bills in the 1950s (U.S. Dept. of the Treasury, n.d.)

In an attempt to add further dimensions and elaborations of Young's concept of cultural imperialism, I employ Spring's (2004) discussions of "cultural genocide" defined as "the attempt to destroy other cultures" (p. 3) through forced acquiescence and assimilation to majority rule and Christian cultural and religious standards. This cultural genocide works through the process of "deculturalization," which Spring describes as "the educational process of destroying a people's culture and replacing it with a new culture" (p. 3).

An example of "cultural genocide" and "deculturalization" can be seen in the case of Christian European American domination over Native American Indians, whom European Americans viewed as "uncivilized," "godless heathens," "barbarians," and "devil worshippers" (Takaki, 1993; Zinn, 1980).

White Christian European Americans deculturalized indigenous peoples through many means: confiscation of land, forced relocation, undermining of their languages, cultures, and identities, forced conversion to Christianity, and the establishment of Christian day schools and off-reservation boarding schools far away from their people (Perlmutter, 1992; Spring, 2004).

The first off-reservation Indian boarding school was established in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1879 and run primarily by white Christian teachers, administered by Richard Pratt, a former cavalry commander in the Indian

Territories. At the school, Indian children were stripped of their culture: the male students' hair was cut short, they were forced to wear Western-style clothing, they were prohibited from conversing in their native languages and English was compulsory, all their cultural and spiritual symbols were destroyed, and Christianity was imposed. As Pratt related to a Baptist audience: "[We must immerse] Indians in our civilization, and when we get them under, [hold] them there until they are thoroughly soaked" (Pratt in Reyhner & Eder, 1989, p. 80). Between 1879 and 1905, 25 Indian boarding schools operated throughout the United States (Spring, 2004).

"Civilizing" Indians became a euphemism for Christian conversion. Christian missionaries throughout the United States worked vigorously to convert Indians. A mid-19th century missionary wrote: "As tribes and nations the Indians must perish and live only as men, [and should] fall in with Christian civilization that is destined to cover the earth" (quoted in Nasaw, 1979).

Throughout the Alaska territory, Christian missionaries, including Presbyterians, Catholics, and Moravians, vied to win converts. Simultaneously, the United States government issued laws barring Alaskan Indian ceremonies regarded as "pagan" and contrary to the spread of Christianity (Hinckley, 1967).

## Violence

A number of groups live with the constant fear of random and unprovoked systematic violence (another of Young's, 1990, "faces") directed against them simply on account of their social identities. The intent of this xenophobic (fear and hatred of anyone of anything seeming "foreign") violence is to harm, humiliate, and destroy the "Other." Young claims that all of the faces of oppression are connected, and in particular, cultural imperialism and violence:

The culturally imperialized may reject the dominant meanings and attempts to assert their own subjectivity, or the fact of their cultural difference may put the lie to the dominant culture's implicit claim to universality. The dissonance generated by such a challenge to the hegemonic cultural meanings can also be a source of irrational violence (p. 47).

During colonial times, religious dissension was not tolerated. For example, the Pilgrims "warned out of town" a Sephardic Jewish merchant (Eck, 2001, p. 36). They also enacted an anti-Catholic statute asserting "that no Jesuit or ecclesiastical person ordained by the authority of the pope shall henceforth come within our Jurisdiction" (quoted in Eck, 2001, p. 36) and banished Quaker missionaries. Later, as Quakers kept coming, the Puritans enacted harsher penalties, for example, cutting off their ears, or using hot irons to bore holes through their

tongues (Corbett & Corbett, 1999). Then, between 1659 to 1661, Puritans executed four Quakers on the gallows on Boston Common. Other religious nonconformists like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were compelled to flee Massachusetts. At his trial in 1635, Williams foretold what would be echoed by many during the coming centuries, that "the civil state [must not] impose upon the soul of the people a religion, a worship, a ministry. The state should give free and absolute permission of conscience to all men in what is spiritual alone" (Williams quoted in Eck, 2001, p. 37).

Today, especially since September 11, 2001, we see growing numbers of violent incidents directed against Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Jews in the United States (Pluralism Project, 2005). The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR, 2005), an American Muslim civil and human rights organization, in their 2005 annual report listed a total of 1,522 civil rights violations against American Muslims, 114 of which were violent hate crimes. This was a 49% increase in total incidents from just one year before. The report included incidents of violence, as well as harassment and discriminatory treatment, including "unreasonable arrests, searches/seizures, and detentions" (p. 6). For example, the CAIR report included an incident in which a Muslim woman wearing a hijab (the garment many Muslim women wear in public) was taking her baby for a walk in a stroller, and a man driving a truck nearly ran them over. The woman cried out that, "You almost killed my baby!," and the man responded, "It wouldn't have been a big loss" (p. 54).

Nearly one-quarter of all reported civil rights violations against American Muslims involve unwarranted arrests and searches (CAIR, 2005). Law enforcement agencies routinely "profile" Muslims of apparent Middle Eastern heritage in airports or simply while driving in their cars for interrogation and invasive and aggressive searches. In addition, governmental agencies, such as the IRS and FBI, continue to enter individuals' private homes and mosques and make unreasonable arrests and detentions. Anti-Muslim hate crimes occur on college and university campuses across the United States (CAIR, 2005).

Sikhs have been the targets of increasing amounts of hate crimes as well. Since 2002, the Sikh Coalition organization listed 62 hate crimes directed against Sikh citizens of the United States (Pluralism Project, 2005). Many of the attacks committed against Sikhs are classified under the category of "personal attacks" or assaults as well as vandalism and arson. One incident involved a Sikh student at the University of North Carolina who was assaulted by three local teenagers. National attention focused on the severe beating of Rajinder Singh Shalsa in New York City, and the fatal shooting of Sikh gas station owner Balbir Singh Sodhi in Mesa, Arizona. It is widely assumed that Sikhs are targeted because they

wear turbans, which the public imagination equates with terrorism (Pluralism Project, 2005).

Hindus have likewise been targeted. In June 2003, for example, Saurabh Bhalariao, a 24-year-old Indian graduate student studying in Massachusetts, was robbed, burned with cigarettes, beaten, stuffed in a truck, and twice stabbed before his assailants dumped him along the road. The attackers allegedly misidentified this Hindu student for a Muslim because during the assault, the perpetrators yelled at him, "Go back to Iraq" (Anti-Defamation League, 2003).

Each year the Anti-Defamation League, a Jewish social advocacy organization, documents incidents of anti-Jewish hate crimes. They reported over 1500 such incidents in 2004 alone, including verbal and physical assault, harassment, vandalism, property damage, and other acts of hate. These included the burning of a Holocaust museum in Indiana, and the spray-painting of swastikas and epithets on the walls and driveway of a Jewish community center near Phoenix, Arizona. This latter incident occurred on my own campus, Iowa State University, during the July 4th weekend, 2005. Among the swastikas, the vandals also spray-painted anti-Muslim, racist, misogynist, and homophobic epithets.

The history of the 19th-century anti-immigration battles illustrates the intersections and interactions among Young's (1990) five faces of powerlessness, exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence, by which non-Christian religious status interacted with subordinated racial(ized) status. Throughout the 19th and into the 20th centuries, nativist exclusionist movements gained momentum within the United States. "Nativist" refers to a stance of the European-heritage mainline Protestant majority who were then residing in the United States. In some cases, non-white, non-Protestant ethnic and religious groups were socially constructed as lower "racial" forms by the mainline Protestant power structure as a justification for exclusion, exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and violence. Subsequently, religion was itself "racialized."

The United States Congress passed the first law to restrict or exclude immigrants on the basis of nationality in 1882. In their attempts to eliminate entry of Chinese (and other Asian) workers who often competed for jobs with U.S. citizens, especially in the western United States, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) to restrict their entry into the U.S. for a ten-year period, while denying citizenship to Chinese people already on these shores (Takaki, 1993). The Act also made it illegal for Chinese people to marry white or black Americans. The exclusionist sentiment regarding the Chinese held by many U.S. citizens was summarized by the editor of the newspaper in Butte, Montana: "The Chinaman's life is not our life, *his religion is not our religion*... He belongs not in Butte" (Swartout, 1992, p. 78, italics added).

The Immigration Act of 1917 further prohibited immigration from Asian countries, in the terms of the law, the "barred zone," including parts of China, India, Siam, Burma, Asiatic Russian, Polynesian Islands, and parts of Afghanistan (Takaki, 1993).

Fearing a continued influx of immigrants, legislators in the U.S. Congress in 1924 enacted an anti-immigration law (Origins Quota Act, or National Origins Act) setting restrictive quotas of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe (groups viewed as representing Europe's lower "races"), including Catholics and Jews (the later referred to as members of the so-called "Hebrew race"). The law, however, permitted large allocations of immigrants from Great Britain and Germany in order to "protect our values... [as] a Western Christian civilization" (Feagin, 1997, p. 35). In addition, the law included a clause prohibiting entry of "aliens ineligible to citizenship," which was veiled language referring to Japanese and other Asians dating back to the Naturalization Act of 1790 restricting citizenship to only "white" people and affirmed by a 1922 United States Supreme Court ruling (*Ozawa v United States*) in which Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant, was denied the right to become a naturalized citizen because he "clearly" was "not Caucasian" (Takaki, 1993, p. 273). The Naturalization Act of 1790 also excluded Native American Indians from citizenship, considering them, paradoxically, as "domestic foreigners" (Spring, 2004, p. 7). They were not accorded rights of citizenship until 1924 when Congress passed the Indian Citizenship Act, though Asians continued to be denied naturalized citizenship status.

In terms of the construction of Jews as racialized "other," by the late 19th century CE, Jews had come to be viewed by the scientific community as a distinct "racial" type, with essential immutable biological characteristics—a trend that increased markedly into the early 20th century CE. Once seen as largely a religious, ethnic, or political group, Jews were increasingly interpolated as members of a "mixed race" (a so-called "mongrel" or "bastard race"), a people who had crossed racial barriers by interbreeding with black Africans during the Jewish Diaspora (Gilman, 1991).

A historical somewhat less tolerance of anti-Semitism occurred following World War II, after the public exposure of religious hatred in Europe and the U.S., with a perceivable decline in anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic sentiments and incidents. Efforts were made to include Judaism and Catholicism into a broader definition of American cultural norms. According to sociologist Will Herberg (1983), Jews and Catholics increasingly participated in the American society and culture alongside mainline Protestants.

Some assert, as does Young (1990), that in the United States, Roman Catholics "are no longer an oppressed group" (p. 39). Though possibly somewhat of an overstatement, this implies, at least, that the gap between

mainline Protestant Christian privilege and discrimination against Roman Catholic Christianity has narrowed, possibly even evaporated.

Once constructed as the “Other” in European society and in the U.S. before World War II, Jews and “Jewishness”—while certainly not fully embraced by the ruling elite as “one of their own”—became a sort of “middle” status in the post-War era, “standing somewhere between the dominant position of the white majority and the marginal position of people of color” (Biale, Galchinsky, & Heschel, 1998, p. 5). Brodtkin (1998) asserted that for Jews, the change in the social construction of their “race,” their “unwhitening and whitening were not of their own making” (p. 175). Instead, changes in Jews’ ethnoracial assignment following World War II were manifest in the nation’s “economic, institutional, and political practices, as well as by changes in scientific and public discourses about race in general and Jews in particular” (p. 175). For Adams and Bracey (2000), Jews may constitute “a race-bending ‘white’ category of people who are still considered by some to be ‘not quite white’” (p. B10).

The first law to eliminate “national origins” as the basis for immigration legislation was The Immigration and Nationality Services Act of 1965. This legislation resulted in dramatic increases in immigration from both Asian and Latin American countries of many religious backgrounds including Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Zoroastrian, varying forms of Catholicism, and African, and Afro-Caribbean religious traditions (Eck, 2001). The 1965 law allowed for 170,000 immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere and 120,000 from the Western Hemisphere with 20,000 immigrants per Eastern Hemisphere country (Spring, 2004; Takaki, 1993).

## LEVELS OF PRIVILEGE AND OPPRESSION

Iris Marion Young (1990) offers a framework with her “faces” to view the varieties and manifestations of the many types of dominant group privilege and oppression, including Christian privilege and religious oppression. I now further elaborate and extend Young’s theoretical organizer using a second conceptual model adapted from the work of Rita Hardiman and Bailey Jackson (1997) to investigate the systemic and cultural origins of these forms of privilege and oppression played out within social institutions, and on the individual level within interpersonal relationships.

### Societal/Cultural Level Christianity

Societal/Cultural level oppression and dominant group privilege, one of Hardiman and Jackson’s (1997) levels, involves the implied and explicit hegemonic cultural norms, values, and perspectives/discourses of the

dominant group imposed and infused “on institutions by individuals and on individuals by institutions” (p. 19). These social and cultural principles, philosophies, and/or discourses related to how one should live one’s life, definitions of good and evil, health and sickness, and normality and deviancy, are often used to provide dominant group members justification and rationalization for social oppression, while often sheltering them from a conscious acknowledgment or understanding of the ways in which they are privileged on the basis of their social identity(ies).

*Constitutional Protection of Religious Freedoms.* Virginia was one of the first states following the Revolutionary War to address the issue of religion and government when Thomas Jefferson, who held deist beliefs, drafted “An Act for the Establishment of Religious Freedom” in 1786. Jefferson’s proposal passed into law in 1786 in Virginia. Then, constitutional framers such as Jefferson and Madison negotiated a compromise with Protestant sectarians, which led to the clause written into the First Amendment of the United States Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . . .” Though nowhere in the U.S. Constitution does the phrase “separation of church and state”<sup>2</sup> appear, it was originally drawn from a letter President Thomas Jefferson sent on January 1, 1802 to the Danbury (Connecticut) Baptists Association.

Jefferson held concerns over the possibility of erosion to First Amendment religious freedoms, a development later confirmed by Alexis de Tocqueville, French political scientist and diplomat, who traveled across the United States for nine months between 1831–1832 conducting research for his epic work, *Democracy in America* (1840/1956). He was astounded to find a certain paradox: On one hand, he observed that the United States promoted itself around the world as a country separating “church and state,” where religious freedom and tolerance were among its defining tenants, but on the other hand, he witnessed that: “There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America” (Tocqueville, 1840/1956, pp. 303–304). He answered this apparent contradiction by proposing that in this country with no officially sanctioned governmental religion, denominations were compelled to compete with one another and promote themselves in order to attract and keep parishioners, thereby making religion even stronger. While the government was not supporting Christian denominations and churches, per se, religion to Tocqueville should be considered as the first of their political institutions since he observed the enormous influence churches had on the political process (Tocqueville, 1840/1956). Though he favored U.S. style democracy, he found its major limitation to be in its stifling of independent thought and independent beliefs. In a country that promoted the

notion that the majority rules, this effectively silenced minorities by what Tocqueville termed the “tyranny of the majority.” This is a crucial point because in a democracy, without specific guarantees of minority rights—in this case minority religious rights—there is a danger of religious domination or tyranny over religious minorities and non-believers. The majority, in religious matters, have historically been adherents to mainline Protestant Christian denominations who often imposed their values and standards upon those who believed otherwise.

*Social/Cultrural Christian Privilege.* George W. Bush and other elected leaders have invoked their Christian faith as the foundation of their political ideology. While governor of Texas, Bush proclaimed June 10, 2000 as “Jesus Day” (Official Memorandum, 2000). Before and during his presidency, Bush and other conservative Christian politicians consistently have called for voucher systems whereby students could choose to attend private parochial schools at public expense and supported prayer in the public schools as well as at school sporting and other events. Some religious, governmental, and educational leaders also push for the teaching of Creationism (reframed as “Intelligent Design”) to explain the genesis of the world and all its creatures. Others advocate for a Constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, a position that Bush and others acknowledge stems from their Christian faith, as does their commitment to the teaching of “abstinence only” sexuality education.

### Institutional Level Christianity

Social institutions—including but not limited to educational, governmental, business, industrial, financial, military, housing, judicial, and religious—often maintain and perpetuate policies that explicitly or implicitly privilege and promote some groups while limiting access, excluding, or rendering invisible other groups based on social identity and social status (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

*History of the Origins of Christian Privilege and Schooling.* Throughout the history of this country, in their role as social institutions, schools have reproduced the cultural and religious norms, often with the attendant range of inequities and privileges found within the larger society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In Colonial America, few regions, except for the larger New England towns, mandated by law the building of schools or the provision of childhood instruction. Schools that were constructed and teachers who were hired were done so only because local citizens decided to pool their resources (Bernard & Mondale, 2001). During this time, classroom lessons were tied directly to the Protestant Bible<sup>3</sup>, which the early settlers brought with them from England.

“Educated” citizens were those who adhered to the “true religion” of the established church in their area, whether it was the Dutch Reformed Church in New Netherland, the Anglican Church of England in Virginia and the Carolinas, the Swedish Lutheran Church in the Delaware area, or the Puritan Congregational Churches in New England. The French, Dutch, Spanish, and Swedes also set up schools, but none as extensively or successfully as the English. (Perlmutter, 1992, p. 260)

School lessons primarily centered around preaching, catechizing, and prayers (Perlmutter, 1992), which called for freedom from “the delusion of the Devil, the malice of the heathen [native American Indians], the invasions of our enemies, and mutinies and dissensions of our own people” (Cremin, 1970, p. 10). A number of Catholic parishes established parochial or parish schools, partly “because Protestant assumptions pervaded the public school curriculum and instruction” (Lippy, 2004, p. 114).

Following the Revolutionary War, leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and others called for state supported and mandated public education, believing that the very survival of the new republic depended on an educated populous (Spring, 2002). Jefferson, for example, advocated for a three-year publicly supported education for all white children—no such guarantees were to be extended to children of slaves—with advanced education provided to a select few males but not females. As Jefferson wrote, the schools will be “raking a few geniuses from the rubbish” (Jefferson in Bernard & Mondale, 2001).

The first statewide school system was established in Massachusetts in the 1820s largely as a result of the efforts of Horace Mann, the first secretary of education of any state in the United States. He proposed a new structure he called “common schools” (Spring, 2002), which were to serve all children of all income levels. He hoped these schools would help to end, or at least reduce, the financial inequities between citizens of the state. Mann and other leaders proposed that the main purpose of public education was for the development of good character based on religion, which was itself based on the central teachings of the Protestant Bible (Bernard & Mondale, 2001).

*Contemporary Christian Privilege and Schooling.* Today, our schools continue to privilege dominant groups while subordinating minority or target groups (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). In the public schools, this is maintained by institutional policies, curricular priorities, mandatory dress codes, mandatory attendance, and even the food available in school cafeterias.

Christian students and school personnel can be reasonably assured that when they talk about their religious traditions or wear religious symbols such as a cross, they will not be the targets of ridicule, discrimination, or harassment by their peers and school officials. Students

and school personnel of other faith communities or non-believers have no such assurance. For example, the parents of four Jewish students who attended public school in Pike County Alabama sued the district when administrators at both Pike County Elementary and High Schools forbade their children from wearing Star of David lapel pins claiming that these were “gang symbols” (though administrators allowed other children to wear crosses). Administrators also prevented Jewish children from participating in physical education class while wearing their yarmulkes (skull caps). In addition, classmates repeatedly harassed and assaulted the children (*Paul Michael Herring v. Dr. John Key*, 1997).

In another example, the physical education teacher of a Muslim elementary school student in Iowa forbade her from wearing a traditional Muslim full-body swimming garment during instruction in the school pool, but ordered her, instead, to wear a western-style bathing suit, which would force the student to act against her faith.<sup>4</sup>

The Alabama and Iowa school cases are similar in that these schools refused appropriate accommodations to school policy for students’ religious practices. In these cases, school officials misinterpreted the concept of “accommodation” as “promotion” of religious observance, and they appeared unaware of the cultural and religious norms maintained by school policies. In both cases, parents of these students intervened on their behalf. The Jewish students’ parents sued the school district, and the eventual settlement resulted in the requirement that school officials intervene once they learn that any of the Jewish children are being harassed on school property. In addition, school officials must allow the children to wear their religious symbols just as Christian students are permitted to wear theirs (*Paul Michael Herring v. Dr. John Key*, 1997). Also, copies of the settlement must be posted in each Pike County school. Regarding the Muslim student, her mother was compelled to educate the principal on Muslim religious practices. After much discussion, the principal agreed to permit the student to wear a swimming garment of her choice, though he warned the girl’s parent that the child would most likely incur angry and mocking epithets from her classmates.

In both instances, parents requested school officials to accommodate the religious practices of their children. While these are appropriate requests, the procedures per se for accommodations are a form and reinforcement of Christian privilege. Schools and workplaces require students and their families who do not follow Christian practices to justify, verify, document, and in other ways “prove” to those in authority that they, indeed, are entitled to accommodations, whether they involve the wearing of religious symbols or garments, attending certain spaces during designated times, being absent from classes to observe religious/spiritual events or services, and other ways. In effect, the authorities have power to either agree to or deny these requests for accommodation

based on their limited or narrow understanding of the practices of other faith communities, as well as their attitudes toward these communities (Schlosser & edlacek, 2001).

### Individual Expressions of Christian Privilege

Dominant group privilege can involve the unconscious or conscious attitudes and beliefs (prejudice) of individuals, and the ways in which these attitudes and beliefs are acted out (discrimination) upon another person or group of individuals within interpersonal relationships (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). Examples include when the view that non-Christian faiths are inferior, or dangerous, or that adherents of those faiths and non-believers are immoral, sinful, or misguided. These stereotyped beliefs on the individual level also can play out within social institutions (through teachers or school counselors) and are reinforced by broader systemic and unexamined societal/cultural norms that have evolved as part of a nation’s history.

Christian privilege at the individual level occurs in proselytizing to convert non-Christians or “lapsed” Christians (back) to Christianity. While many Christians view proselytizing as offering the gift of Jesus to the “unbelievers,” many if not most individuals of other faiths and many non-believers consider this as an imposition, manipulation, and oppression. Christian proselytizing rests on a foundation of Christian privilege (Schlosser, 2003).

In school contexts, non-Christian students experience unwelcome attention when they are called on, whether or not they raise their hand, to speak for their “religion” and their “people.” Christian students are rarely if ever expected to speak for all Christians. On the other hand, each day, if there are one or two students who are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Baha’i, Zoroastrian, Shinto, Jain, Sikh, Daoist, Caodaist, Asatru, Taoist, Wiccan, Pagan, members of indigenous native communities, or students who are atheist or agnostic, they may be singled out by their teacher to “educate” others. A form of Christian privilege involves the notion that one does not have to educate oneself—to become familiar with the religious beliefs and customs of other religious communities. On the other hand, members of these other, often invisible, communities need to be familiar with Christian traditions not only because of Christian hegemony but also as a necessary condition for emotional and often physical survival to negotiate between the dominant Christian culture and their own religious cultures.

### RESISTANCE AND SCHOOL REFORM

According to Schlosser (2003), Christians can deny that they have Christian privilege by claiming that all religions are essentially the same, so, therefore, they have

no more or less benefits accorded to them than members of other faith communities. When I raise issues of Christian privilege and the celebration of Christian holidays in the public schools with students in my university preservice teacher education courses, they challenge me by asserting that these celebrations and decorations have nothing to do with religion per se and that the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, Christmas trees, garlands, wreaths, the colors red and green during December, and songs like "Here Comes Peter Cottontail," or "Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer" do not represent Christianity. They argue that these are largely seasonal reminders and, as such, are part of "American culture." In fact, they assert, that some of these symbols were taken from pagan rituals.

While some of the religious significance has diminished over time as traditional Christian religious practice has entered the public square, on critical analysis, the clearly religious meanings, symbolism, positionality, and antecedents of these practices betray claims to mere secularism. The effect of the so-called "secularization of religion," in fact, not only fortifies but, indeed, strengthens Christian privilege by perpetuating Christian hegemony in such a way as to avoid detection as religion or circumvent violating the constitutional requirements for the separation of religion and government. Christian dominance, therefore, is maintained by its relative invisibility, and with this invisibility, privilege is neither analyzed nor scrutinized, neither interrogated nor confronted. Dominance is perceived as unremarkable or "normal," and when anyone poses a challenge or attempts to reveal its religious significance, those in the dominant group brand them as "subversive" or as "sacrilegious." Schlosser (2003) contends that the exposure of Christian privilege breaks a "sacred taboo," and that "both subtle and obvious pressures exist to ensure that these privileges continue to be in the sole domain of Christians. This process is quite similar to the way in which whites and males continue to (consciously and unconsciously) ensure the privilege of their racial and gender groups" (p. 47).

Some claim that the religious significance of these cultural practices stems not from Christianity per se, but, rather, from what they refer to as a "Judeo-Christian" tradition. Beaman (2003) argues that "this obscures the pervasiveness of anti-Semitism in the modern world" (p. 322), and I would add, obscures the major differences between these two monotheistic religions and denies the primarily Christian antecedents to these practices. Take, for example, the current and longstanding controversy related to displaying the "Ten Commandments" in an Alabama courthouse. While the "Ten Commandments" (in the original Hebrew, referred to as *'aseret hadibrot*—the ten utterances) are, indeed, important traditions of the Jewish faith, the Hebrew or Jewish Bible lists 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) for Jews to follow. Christians

have extracted the "Ten Commandments," and those fighting to display them in the public square are primarily Evangelical Christians who misleadingly claim "Judeo-Christian" tradition as their battle cry.

When one reveals or questions dominant group privilege, often members of dominant groups react negatively; they can become "triggered." This point was evidently clear when I asked my university preservice teacher education students, "Are public schools appropriate places to celebrate religious holidays, even when such holidays are presented in a 'secular' manner?" After I asked this, a student read a "Letter to the Editor" from that day's campus newspaper in which a male student complained that each time he passed the so-called "Holiday tree" (a.k.a. Christmas tree) on our campus, he felt psychologically assaulted because he believed others were attempting to impose their religious symbols and traditions upon him. He continued that even though the decorations and labor to install them were paid by private donations, the presence of a Christmas tree on a publicly supported state university violated the separation of religion and state and violated his freedom *from* religion, and therefore, had no place on our campus. I then invited students in a spirit of openness and respect to discuss their viewpoints on this specific controversy, and reminded them that these sorts of discussions are also currently underway in the public schools of our nation.

Shortly into our class discussion, two students, with disdain on their faces, abruptly collected their belongings and stormed out of the classroom. Other students, while somewhat unnerved by these students' actions, continued, nonetheless, to vigorously debate the issues, while others were noticeably silent, their eyes fixed on the floor in front of them. This discussion had obviously brought to the surface deep emotions. The two students who had walked out of class I later learned were upset by what they perceived as a direct challenge to their religious faith and practices. I opened the next class session to continue our discussion on this topic, and many students stated that though the discussion had made them uncomfortable, it had also permitted them the chance to reflect on these issues from differing perspectives in a way that they could begin their journey of awareness of their previously held assumptions. The two students who left class early the previous class session returned, and on a few occasions, added their views on the topic.

Over the years, the Supreme Court has clarified the ways in which the First Amendment relates to public schools (*Abington v. Schempp*, 1963; *Engel v. Vitale*, 1962). The court ruled that schools may not sponsor religious practices, though they may teach about religion as an academic topic. In addition, while not ruling directly on the matter of religious holidays in the school, the Supreme Court let stand a lower

federal court decision (*Florey v. Sioux Falls School District*, 1980) that recognition of religious holidays may be constitutional when the purpose is to give secular *instruction* about religion or religious traditions rather than to promote any specific religious doctrine or practice.

Many pedagogical strategies are available to educators to facilitate discussions of controversial religious topics. Some of these strategies are based on constructivism, a student-centered method emphasizing the active role of the learner, whereby students “construct” or build understanding, making sense of the information, and utilizing problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Key characteristics of constructivist instruction include: organizing material and lessons around important ideas, acknowledging the importance of students’ prior learning, challenging the adequacy of prior learning, providing a certain amount of ambiguity and uncertainty, assisting learners in how to learn, viewing learning as a joint venture between students themselves and between students and educator(s), and assisting students in assessing their knowledge acquisition during a lesson (Woolfolk, 2004).

Within the constructivist framework, Robert Kegan (1982) has developed a three-part method to bring students to a new level of awareness or to help them “unlearn” prior misinformation or knowledge that inhibits personal or academic growth. In stage one—Confirmation—educators attempt to meet learners where they are, to draw them out, listening to them and legitimizing their beliefs without judgment, guilt, or blame. In stage two—Contradiction—educators “stretch” students’ existing views by reframing the topic by offering new information or a new perspective. They solicit alternative views from other students, draw out contradictions, and provide the opportunity for exchange. In stage three—Continuity—educators continue and extend the process begun in stage two, giving constructive feedback, offering praise for engaging in the process, and using humor if and when appropriate.

Constructivism includes critical thinking, described by Brookfield (1995) as consisting of three interrelated phases: First, there is discovery of the assumptions that guide our decisions, actions, and choices. Educators assist students in answering the question: What do I think and why do I think of it the way I do? Second, educators assist students in checking the accuracy of their assumptions by exploring as many different perspectives, viewpoints, and sources as possible: talking with others, taking courses, reading, researching. Third, educators encourage students to make informed decisions that are based on the evidence they have discovered, evidence they can trust, evidence that can be explained to others, and which has a good chance of achieving the effects they want.

While it is not the intention here to give a comprehensive narrative on how to bring religious equity in

the public schools—for what might work effectively in one school might not function in another—some foundational guidelines for educators and school administrators can be considered (Blumenfeld, 2006):

- Assessment: Hold public hearings, and/or conduct interviews, or distribute research surveys in your school, community, and/or your state to access the needs, concerns, and life experiences of members of different faith communities and of non-believers.
- Policies: Develop policies protecting students, faculty, staff, and administrators of every (and no) faith from harassment, violence, and discrimination, and to provide equality of treatment.
- Personnel Trainings: Offer training to all school personnel, including guidance counselors and social workers, in religious diversity and bullying prevention, and specifically to address the religious accommodation needs of students and school personnel.
- Library Collections: Develop and maintain up-to-date and age appropriate collections of books, videos/DVDs, and other academic materials pertaining to world religions and non-believers.
- Educational Forums: Organize and sponsor community-wide forums to discuss issues related to religious diversity and religious pluralism.
- Curriculum and School Programs<sup>5</sup>: Include accurate, honest, up-to-date, and age-appropriate information regarding religious issues presented uniformly and without bias or judgment. In this regard, when introducing a controversial topic, such as Christian privilege and religious oppression, it is effective to bring into the classroom a panel of outside speakers, composed of, for example, those who identify as Christian and understand the benefits they are accorded on the basis of their religious identity. Often students, particularly those who follow primarily Christian faiths, will be more inclined to “hear” those who are most like themselves. Also on the panel could be members of other faith communities as well as non-believers.
- Adult Role Models: Recruit faculty and staff from disparate religious and spiritual backgrounds as well as non-believers to serve as supportive role models for all youth.
- Teacher Certification: Include information and training on issues pertaining to religious diversity, religious oppression, and Christian privilege in college and university teacher education programs.
- Teacher Continuing Self-Education:
  - Educate yourself about world religions and the history of religion and religious oppression in the United States and other countries throughout the world.
  - Educate yourself to the needs and experiences of people from many religious and spiritual backgrounds. Without having the expectation that it is their responsibility to teach you, listen to, and truly hear the voices of religious minorities and non-believers when they do relate their experiences to you. Attempt not to become defensive, argumentative, and do not try to change their minds. These are their experiences, their perceptions, and the meanings they make, and, therefore, not up for debate.

- Put yourself in the shoes of religious minorities and non-believers, especially during major Christian holiday seasons. Attempt to experience those seasons from their perspectives. What do you perceive? Ask yourself next time you automatically wish someone a Merry Christmas or Happy Easter, or when you are about to send someone a Christmas or even a Season's Greeting card, whether the person on the other end would truly welcome the gesture, or whether you might be imposing your traditions and values on that person.
- Attend cultural events of religions other than your own.
- Be aware of the generalizations you make. If you are Christian, do not assume that all people you meet are Christian as well. Assume there are people of other faiths and non-believers in your school, workplace, and community.
- To sensitize yourself on the topic of Christian privilege, if you are Christian, notice the times you explicitly or implicitly disclose this during the course of your day.
- Monitor politicians, the media, and organizations to assess their level of sensitivity to issues around religious pluralism.
- Work and vote for candidates (including school board members) taking positions in support of religious pluralism.

Social theorist, Gunnar Myrdal (1962), traveled throughout the United States during the late 1940s examining U.S. society following World War II, and he discovered a grave contradiction or inconsistency, which he termed "an American dilemma." He found a country, founded on an overriding commitment to democracy, liberty, freedom, human dignity, and egalitarian values, coexisting alongside deep-seated patterns of racial discrimination and privileging white people while subordinating peoples of color. This contradiction has been powerfully reframed for contemporary consideration by religious scholar, Diana Eck (2001),

The new American dilemma is real religious pluralism, and it poses challenges to America's Christian churches that are as difficult and divisive as those of race. Today, the invocation of a Christian America takes on a new set of tensions as our population of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Buddhist neighbors grows. The ideal of a Christian America stands in contradiction to the spirit, if not the letter, of America's foundational principle of religious freedom. (p. 46)

An inclusive model, one that ensures individuals' and groups' *freedom of* as well as *freedom from* religion is the concept as well as a national goal of "cultural and religious pluralism." The Jewish immigrant and sociologist of Polish and Latvian heritage, Horace Kallen (1915), coined the term "cultural pluralism" to challenge the image of the so-called "melting pot," which he considered to be inherently undemocratic. Kallen envisioned a United States in the image of a great symphony orchestra, not sounding in unison (the "melting pot"), but

rather, one in which all the disparate cultures play in harmony and retain their unique and distinctive tones and timbres.

Today, the United States stands as the most religiously diverse country in the world. This diversity poses great challenges as well as opportunities. To quote Eck (2001): "The presumption that America is foundationally Christian is being challenged, really for the first time. There is no going back. As we say in Montana, the horses are already out of the barn" (p. 46).

## NOTES

1. I discuss the term "Common Era" in the forthcoming section of this essay under "Cultural Imperialism."

2. I use the phrase "separation of religion and state" or "separation of religion and government" rather than the more common "separation of church and state" since the later is a prime example of Christian hegemony and Christian privilege in that many religions' houses of worship are not referred to as "churches," which are primarily Christian structures.

3. The terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" can themselves be considered as Christian terms in that many Jews, for example, refer to these texts as "The Hebrew Bible" or "The Jewish Bible" and "The Christian Testaments" or "The Christian Gospels." For many Jews, there is nothing "old" about their Bible.

4. This later incident was discovered through personal correspondence with the party involved. The individual requested anonymity in the reporting of this case.

5. While the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and a number of subsequent court decisions have made it clear that the *promotion* or *celebration* of religion is not appropriate in public schools, they have likewise asserted that the teaching of religions as an academic topic is within legal guidelines.

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