

The Unscripted

Series

Topic:
Religion

About

There are scripts running all the time in our society that tell us how to act, what to say, what's right and what isn't. Sociologists describe these scripts as social norms or mores which determine what is acceptable or unacceptable in any given culture. These norms are often represented in different types of social contracts. Some contracts are very formal in that they spell out explicit expectations and rules that govern the expectations and acceptable actions of stakeholders or citizens (E.g. Laws or legal documents). Other scripts like "the status quo" are much more informal and sometimes even go unspoken. Make no mistake, however, the status quo is still a very powerful force in creating, maintaining and perpetuating a state of affairs that governs how individuals and groups relate to each other. In the sections below, we hope to help you reconsider what is "normal" and "acceptable". We know that we will only scratch the surface, but if we can help you become a little more conscious of how bias or prejudice operates in our social contracts that influence our expectations and behaviors we will have taken a significant step toward unpacking the power of scripts in our society.

What?

In the sections below we want to help you reflect on the idea of "faith" as a process of meaning making, "belief" as a particular way of making sense of things and "religion" as an organizing cultural system for both faith and belief. Depending on your own cultural background and teaching context you may be wary of religion and/or religious language. We understand these concerns and hope to help you explore religion as a powerful cultural system that organizes some of the most deeply held beliefs, values and practices. Because religion creates, sustains and advances cultural ways of life it is important to have the skills to respectfully engage different kinds faith traditions and explore what faith communities think and feel about race and experiences of racism. This is particularly important for engaging devout neighbors or coworkers or color from marginalized religious communities. Developing the skills and competencies to understand and articulate Christianity as a historically privileged religious tradition in the United States is an important first step toward unpacking how cultural beliefs, values and practices have been used to both emancipate people of color as well as to oppress and enslave them.

So What?

As a cultural construct, it should come as no surprise that religion is not immune from bias, bigotry and prejudice. The Founding Fathers of the United States understood the dangers of linking government and religious systems and sought to separate them in the constitution for the life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness of citizens. The founding of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania serves as a case in point for those fleeing oppressive religious and government forces. William Penn fled persecution in England for being a Quaker and came to America in 1682. He established Pennsylvania as a place where people could enjoy freedom of religion. Yet, Penn owned slaves. In Philadelphia (the city of brotherly love) the paradox of race and religion can also be seen in a historic racial schism in 1794 at St. George's church which led to the founding of the Mother Bethel congregation. When officials at St. George's church pulled blacks off their knees while praying, Richard Allen, a self-educated former Delaware slave, organized and led a small group of black congregants out of St. George's church. Due to persisting interference by white Methodists, Allen sued in the Pennsylvania courts in 1807 and 1815 and won the right of his new congregation to exist as an independent institution. Sensitive to the plight of other black Methodists in surrounding communities who were also encountering racism, Allen held a convening in Philadelphia in 1816 and the first African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination was formed. Today, global membership of the AME denomination is estimated to be around 2.5 million - one of the largest Methodist denominations in the world. Presently, the role of religion in American society has changed dramatically from the early 1800's due in no small part to globalization and immigration. The presence of mosques, temples, and other houses of worship serve as important cultural artifacts evidencing an increasingly diverse array of world religions practiced in the United States. Yet, it is important to remember that religious pluralism doesn't necessarily reduce racism and segregation - in fact it can create new challenges for how we make meaning of the world. It is important to recognize the privilege to avoid uncomfortable conversations about religion and race and reflect on how we might create safe spaces for more discussion about where these collide.

Now What?

Here are some additional resources to help you take action:

- Explore the Religious Pluralism Project at Harvard :<https://pluralism.org/dr-diana-eck>
- Survey your community or place of work to determine if there are safe spaces for a variety of different religious expressions
- Explore resources from the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC): <https://ifyc.org/>
- Consider this activity on cultural relativism and ethnocentricity https://aace-english.com/free-lessons/world-religions/ADV_Ethnocentrism_or_Cultural_Relativism.pdf
- Consider "My Multicultural Self" exercise <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/my-multicultural-self>
- Explore this racial justice tool for leaders from the United Methodist Women: <https://www.unitedmethodistwomen.org/download-resources/racial-justice-tools-for-leaders.pdf>
- Collection of resources from The Institute of Faith and Learning at Baylor University: <https://www.baylor.edu/ifl/index.php?id=937717>
- Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative: <http://www.muslimarc.org/about>
- Collection of Jewish resources from EVOLVE: <http://evolve.reconstructingjudaism.org/judaism-and-race>
- Read and discuss the New York Times article "America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity" by Robert Wuthnow: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/02/books/chapters/america-and-the-challenges-of-religious-diversity.html>
- Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life: <https://www.pewforum.org/2014/04/04/global-religious-diversity/>