



If We Stay Silent, Injustice Will Persist:

A Call to Interfaith Communities to Own our Racial Realities & Dismantle Racism

By DeShannon Bowens & Elizabeth Simson Durant

Introduction

The creation of this article began on November 22, 2015 in Atlanta, GA after participating in an Interfaith panel focused on racial justice at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting. We believe the ancestors throughout history who've contributed to the freedom we enjoy today call us to consistently work toward undoing racism. Answering that "call" compels us to question why some [Interfaith](#)¹ groups and initiatives are reluctant to name and address racism.

A common practice of worship at predominately black churches is "call and response"². This style of communication is also common in African based religions and depends on a connection between the speaker and listener. It is our intention that this ancestral, call and response written offering, will encourage Interfaith communities to examine issues of power, privilege and authority in order to disrupt the silence and shame that keeps us from fully engaging in the work of dismantling racism.

The Call by *Iyanifa Rev. DeShannon Bowens, M.S.*

In the time I have participated in Interfaith education and work, two things have become apparent. First, Interfaith education is a wonderful way to combat ignorance by bringing people together of various backgrounds and cultures to study numerous religious paths and spiritual practices from around the world. Second, Interfaith initiatives in the United States will not be as effective as they can be without naming and disrupting how all of us are affected and influenced by racism. The avoidance of discussing the social construct of race and the effects of racism weakens the influence of Interfaith movements and impacts who truly feels valued in Interfaith spaces.

This was a difficult conclusion to arrive at considering I was positively transformed by Interfaith education and ordination. I would not have had the courage to be fully transparent as a practitioner of an indigenous African spiritual path if it were not for the support I received during seminary. As a student, I was accepted as an initiate and priestess in the spiritual tradition of Ifa that originates from the Yoruba people of Southwest Nigeria. The unconditional love I received as an African American woman within my Ifa community during my first decade of spiritual practice was similar to the sense of belonging I experienced when I chose to enter the doors of an Interfaith seminary. Unfortunately, some of my experiences

¹ See Interfaith Center of New York's description of Interfaith here: <http://interfaithcenter.org/about-icny/>

² See Patricia Liggins Hill (ed.) *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Houghton Mifflin College Division, 1998.



after becoming an ordained minister were surprising interactions with people who projected distrust, apprehension and fear towards me due to their own religious and racial stereotypes.

Religious racial diversity and inclusion are needed to begin disrupting the effects of prejudice, stereotypes and bias based on race. The majority of Interfaith conversations I have observed and participated in consist of the Abrahamic religious traditions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Sometimes practitioners of eastern traditions such as: Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism are included. Initiates of indigenous North American spiritual traditions and African based religions are often excluded or not thought of. Some Interfaith leaders are under the impression that these religions are extinct and therefore not relevant. Nothing could be further from the truth.

While followers of these spiritual traditions are small in comparison to other religious paths, the [Pew Research Center in 2012](#), estimated more than 400 million people worldwide (6%) practice various folk or traditional religions. This includes: African traditional religions, Chinese folk religions, Native American religions and Australian aboriginal religions³. Practitioners of spiritual traditions that originate from the Yoruba culture in Southwest Nigeria are sometimes referred to as Orisa worshippers. According to anthropologist Sandra Barnes, in her book *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New (African Systems of Thought)*, 70 million African and new world people are practicing Orisa religions in some form throughout the world⁴. Scholar and founder of the [African Diasporic Religious Studies Association](#), Funlayo Wood, estimates practitioners of African and African Diasporic traditional religions at 100 million which would make it the eighth largest world religion⁵.

In the United States, harmful acts of violence were committed against enslaved Africans and Native American indigenous people who tried to retain their religious and spiritual practices. When practitioners from these traditions are not included in Interfaith dialogues, a huge opportunity for healing, problem solving and creating change is missed. Interfaith groups who solely focus on the appearance of racial diversity must be mindful not to fall under the illusion that the prevention of racism has been solved. Diversity consists of inviting various groups of people to have a seat at the dinner table to eat a prepared meal. Inclusion actually allows various groups to participate in creating the meal instead of expecting them to eat what has been placed in front of them. Internalized superiority can always demand to have a seat at any Interfaith table. This is a person's inner belief that she or he is of greater authority and value over someone else. This frame of thought (*usually*

³ The Global Religious Landscape. Retrieved February 27, 2016 from:
<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/>

⁴ Are Blacks Abandoning Christianity for African Faiths? Retrieved February 18, 2016 from:
<http://thegrio.com/2011/10/19/african-religions-gain-following-among-black-christians/>

⁵ This statistic was shared on February 28, 2016 during a panel at the [Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute's](#) symposium on Orisha Sacred Traditions. More of Funlayo Wood's work is available through <http://www.adrsa.org/>.



based on race, class, gender &/or religion) produces an attitude of disdain for those one believes is less than them.

In 2015, I was invited to a national Interfaith convening because of my background as a psychotherapist, Interfaith minister and priestess in the Ifa spiritual tradition. Religious people who worked in the field of mental health came from all over the country. At first glance, the people gathered appeared to be very diverse. However, the majority of attendees were from Abrahamic religious traditions. There were a few Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh people. Two of us were practitioners of African based religions and I was the only Interfaith minister there. Despite the lack of religious diversity I was used to, I expected to be treated with kindness and respect.

In small breakout groups we discussed the various ways our religious and spiritual practices could be used to help people heal therapeutically. Every time I spoke, the minister who was responsible for asking us questions would cut me off. I found his behavior odd and wondered if he was treating me this way because I was a woman. Yet, there was another woman in the group who shared her experience without interruption. He seemed to not have an issue with my race because he allowed an African American man in the group to respond fully. Finally I realized he responded to me in the manner he did out of fear and ignorance of African spirituality. Our facilitator was a Christian minister who held a place of privilege at this Interfaith gathering. He dismissed my spiritual practices with contempt without opening his heart to truly listen.

"Afrophobia" is a term defined by [Dr. Dianne M. Stewart](#) as a fear of all things related to African culture and a product of slavery and colonialism. In an article for the [Grio](#), Dr. Stewart further explains, "Historical records indicate that most black churches and missionaries of the 19th century understood African religious traditions as a threat to the moral and cultural uplift of black communities and described anyone practicing those religions as barbaric, primitive and savage."⁶ The bias and prejudices projected onto practitioners of these traditions and their exclusion in the Interfaith landscape is a product of racism and systematic religious oppression. Most Indigenous spiritual traditions are oral and not given as much value and credence as "written" or "revealed" traditions. Indigenous spiritual practices originating from people of color are often referred to as: superstitious, backwards, evil, heathenism and "of the devil". These same racial stereotypes were historically used to describe enslaved Africans and Native Americans. This history of prejudice and exclusion has affected how people who currently follow these spiritual teachings navigate their lives and express themselves in present times.

When I decided to fully commit to the path of Ifa, I was advised by an elder priestess in the tradition to keep it to myself. My mentor was a black woman who

⁶ See Dr. Stewart quoted in the Grio article in previous footnote #3 and Stewart, Dianne M. (2005) *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience*, Oxford University Press.



experienced discrimination because of her racial and religious identification. She was trying to protect me from what she feared I may experience if I were to be public in the same way a Jewish, Christian or Muslim practitioner could (*although Islamophobia has made life unsafe for many Muslims*). Her advice to me was rooted in the reality of racial oppression and religious inferiority. Historian and religious scholar, [Dr. Tracey Hucks](#) notes in her book *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism*, "Africa was perceived as a continent of void and dearth marked by intellectual, religious, and cultural deficiencies"⁷. So it should not be surprising that I was taught to shrink and hide how I connect to the Divine in order to move safely in the world. Nor is it shocking that the minister I previously mentioned and met in 2015 was an African American who displayed afrophobia when I spoke of African spiritual practices with reverence and pride.

Sitting with this new level of awareness I pondered, "***In our desire to experience oneness and unity in Interfaith spaces, why do we bypass discussing the supremacist religious thoughts, internalized racial superiority and internalized racial inferiority that blocks it?***"⁸ White Interfaith educators have also made prejudiced remarks about African based religions in my presence. Until I participated in State of Formation's Interfaith panel on Racial Justice at the annual AAR meeting, I had not discussed the issue of race or racism with any Interfaith colleagues or friends who were not people of African descent or from the Latinx community. For example, I was racially profiled and pulled over by a police officer on a Spring night in 2015. At that time, there was no Interfaith space racially and religiously inclusive enough for me to feel safe and supported sharing the experience of anger, fear and triumph as I listened to the voice of my ancestors guide me through an interaction with a young white male police officer who nervously approached my car with his hand near the gun in his holster. Due to the deafening silence I observed in many Interfaith/spiritual/religious communities and settings, my personal experiences of prejudice and bias based on my race and the religion I practice did not feel welcome to discuss and process.

Perhaps it is easier for some of us to look outside ourselves for injustices to confront rather than look within. At this time in history, on the eve of a new President taking office who takes pride in advocating racial religious bigotry and xenophobia, we cannot afford to let fear, discomfort and shame stop us from having honest conversations about racism and pointing out how it shows up in Interfaith settings. In order to make our unconscious beliefs about race conscious, consistent self-analysis must be done on a regular basis because it is salient to be aware of when we have power, privilege and how to use it.

In my discussions with Interfaith ministers of color, I learned that some of them went to an Interfaith seminary because they expected to be honored, seen and

⁷ Hucks, Tracey E. (2012) *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism*, (p. 29). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

⁸ See the work of The People's Institute for Survival & Beyond at <http://www.pisab.org/our-principles>.



accepted. Others wanted to get away from dogma or fundamentalism within their own birth religion. Those of us who believe in Interfaith education have a responsibility to make sure the religious and spiritual environments we learn and worship in are open, safe, knowledgeable and loving when it comes to naming and dismantling racism and its byproducts when it is present in our communities. Loving another as we love ourselves requires listening to someone else share their truth and doing what we can to alleviate suffering. A belief in our connection and oneness does not mean we pick and choose which injustice is more valid or comfortable to face.

In *There is No Hierarchy of Oppression*, Audre Lorde states, “*Children need to learn that they do not have to become like each other in order to work together for a future they will all share.*” She goes on to say, “*freedom from intolerance does not belong to one group... when they appear to destroy me, it will not be long before they appear to destroy you.*”⁹ We owe it to ourselves, the ancestors and future generations to move beyond tolerance to acceptance, respect and affirmation. This is part of the urgent call for Interfaith work if we want to heal the pain of racial religious prejudice that excludes and take action when we witness and experience injustice in the world.

The Response by Rev. Elizabeth Simson Durant, M.Div.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to respond to Iyanifa Rev. Bowens’ call to explore the silence around race and racism in Interfaith communities. As a white christian clergyperson in the United Church of Christ, I start from a place of tangled complicity with regard to racism. The silencing of indigenous religions and genocide of indigenous people, from Africa to the Americas, was perpetuated by my theological ancestors, Congregationalist missionary-invader-colonizers who believed in the superiority of their European culture.

So I begin my response by taking responsibility for this legacy and acknowledge the truth of Iyanifa Rev. Bowens’ statements about the devaluing of African and indigenous religions. Yes, that destruction occurred, and yes, it was committed by founders of the religious tradition, white christianity, that I continue to practice today. These acts of genocide and my church’s ongoing participation in racism are, in the words of our tradition, a deep sin. My church has yet to adequately repent and make reparations for our violence, theft and denial of our actions. This complicity and inaction shapes how my church participates in Interfaith gatherings and inhibits our ability to contribute in ways that do not perpetuate racism.

Iyanifa Rev. Bowens asked why, in Interfaith communities, do we “*bypass discussing the supremacist religious thoughts and internalized racial superiority.*” My own observation is that silence around race in Interfaith space stems, in part, from white anxiety about being seen as racist. (*I will only speak for whites in my*

⁹ Lorde, Audre (1983). *There is No Hierarchy of Oppression*, in Brandt, Eric (ed.) *Dangerous Liaisons: Blacks, Gays, and the Struggle for Equality* (1999), (pp 306-307). New York: The New Press.



observations, although some of these thoughts may apply to people who possess social power because of class, heterosexuality or gender privilege.) An Interfaith gathering is already an anxious moment for many whites, who are concerned about using the right words and appearing competent, knowledgeable, and open-minded. This anxiety reflects the drive for perfectionism that is a central component of [white supremacy culture](#)¹⁰.

In my experience, living in a large Pacific Northwest city, Interfaith community often meets in white christian churches. We meet in buildings erected by people who quite literally devalued and silenced indigenous and African religions through their missionary conquest. In addition to the tangible physical presence of such history, the present-day format and structure of our gatherings reflect white supremacy culture in unquestioned and pernicious ways: starting and ending at appointed times, agenda-setting by only a few people, recording meeting notes in writing, interpreting progress as how much we achieve, etc. The physical container and format of the gathering thus doesn't offer any interruption to white supremacy as usual.

Business "as usual" includes ignoring the race of white folks, and acting as if race is only an issue for people of color. Within my own faith, for example, white clergy rarely label themselves as white or acknowledge that many of our spiritual practices are culturally specific, rooted in European immigrant language that gradually (*or abruptly, in some cases*) became American-English, yet retained European customs for dress, order and behavior. I think this silence reflects the ways that European immigrants have been trained to adopt whiteness without recognizing it.

Whites that I know rarely experience a disconnect or tension between their culture and their faith. In contrast, what I hear from African-American christians is that their faith and its expression in language, worship and service, speaks to the concerns of their communities' need for resistance and liberation. First Nations christians, such as members of [Wiconi International](#), claim space for indigenous culture within christianity by affirming that you can follow Jesus and practice indigenous ritual, ceremony, and honor tribal norms for family and community life. Yet there is no explicit connection made by white christians between their religious life and their race. I believe this is because white supremacy culture encourages whites to remain ignorant of their racial identities¹¹ and ignore the ways that coherence between white culture and religion was achieved through violence and oppression.

¹⁰ See Kenneth Jones & Tema Okun, *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*. ChangeWork, 2001 for more about white supremacy culture. Excerpt retrieved February 27, 2016 from: http://www.cswsworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html.

¹¹ See especially Rebecca Parker, "Not Somewhere Else, but Here: The Struggle for Racial Justice as a Struggle to Inhabit My Country" in Bowers-Wheatley, M. and Jones, Palmer N. (ed.) *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (2003), (pp 171-198). Boston: Skinner House Books.



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If whites who are engaged in Interfaith work, regardless of their faith tradition, don't feel comfortable talking about race and racism, then they don't raise the topic. Some whites that I know aren't comfortable with addressing whiteness, and the degrees to which their own cultural and ethnic identities fit (*poorly or well*) with dominant white culture. There is a strong sense of risk, leading almost to paralysis, around offending others by talking about race. To notice and name the racist behavior I see exhibited by a person whose faith is different from my own can be perceived as an attack...as if I am denigrating their religion by calling out racism.

Silence about race among whites is rooted in the ways that whites nurture and support white supremacy by behaving as if their life experience is the race-less "normal," the default experience of what it means to be American. As a white person, I have experienced many times the tangible rewards that I receive when I am silent about race. My silence enables me to stop thinking about the sins of my ancestors, to act as if I am only responsible for the present moment. It allows me to minimize the obvious reality that I am wholly ignorant about the life experiences of people of color, even if we grew up on the same street, went to the same grade school. Yet when I talk with other whites about our silence, I hear us notice our fear of being "found out" as bad, immoral people. For many whites like me, a painful sense of shame for our ignorance makes us feel like failures when it comes to race.

Because of the work I have done around naming race and racism, I have discovered that my body knows and remembers the crimes committed by my ancestors. When I talk to my ancestors, they tell me that they know they failed me, and it is very painful for them. In my experience, most whites, even and especially the ones who deny the realities of racism, are deeply ashamed. Even if we don't know how our ancestors were implicated, our bodies carry those unconscious memories.

Another reason for silence about race in Interfaith circles stems from the way our work is framed. The goal of Interfaith work is often identified as "cooperation," "dialogue," or "tolerance." Those organizations that are explicit about justice and liberation, for example the [Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Justice \(IMIRJ\)](#), are much more vocal about racism and include a racial consciousness in their organizing goals. Our local chapter of Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ) has an Interfaith Action Group, and since the explicit goal of our group is to dismantle white supremacy, we of course discuss race and the different ways that whiteness and racism affect our faith communities. Without such an explicit goal, race seems to go underground and become potentially invisible.

How can whites start to break the silence around race and racism? What does it mean to be a white person of faith who names whiteness and seeks to resist it? One way that I have begun this work is to bring my attention to the times when I feel like an insider. I'm aware that growing up white has led me to internalize a sense of superiority. In Interfaith gatherings, my whiteness means that I assume that I will be welcomed, able to participate, respected and valued. I assume that

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my experience will be relevant and that I can “simply ask” if there is anything I need. I have a sense of entitlement to this type of treatment, to being in the center.

Recently the ecumenical group in my home town organized a day-long gathering to discuss the [Doctrine of Discovery](#) and its impacts. The speakers were indigenous scholars, teachers, and tribal leaders. The event was hosted in a large, Christian cathedral. The majority of the people who attended were white Christians, but there was a small cohort of vocal indigenous folks present.

At times, it felt like the whites like me were spectators being called to accountability and to witness the pain we'd caused. Yet we also were not participating in taking responsibility or affirming that we believed or agreed with what we heard. I experienced some dissociation while listening, a sense of being pulled between opening my heart to hear, and the building itself wanting me to defend it. Then during one of the especially difficult stories, my close friend, an indigenous storyteller, grabbed my hand and held it tight. I held her as we heard this pain together. Because she is my friend, I forgot about myself and focused on her.

Reflecting on how my body changed with the touch of my friend's hand, I realized there's a way in which being white means I have to always be tending to white supremacy. I have to prop it up, let it define me, give me instructions about who I am, what I am entitled to, what I should expect. At times it feels like an overwhelming amount of expectations to navigate: threats, bribes for 'good' behavior, sanctions, checkpoints with locks and guards. I need to keep my body and my family safe. But I also need to remember who I am and not fall asleep to the call from the Holy on my life.

When I'm focused on being someone's friend, it is easier for me to ignore and reduce that tending. I'm not trying to arrive at the perfect analysis of the problem or craft the appropriate response. I'm just being present, in love, to someone that I care for. I'm being more human and less white. That feels good and strong to me. This leads me to wonder, “What are the ways I can build more freedom and openness to be a human and resist being white?”

Part of what whites like me can do is to resist taking charge, stepping into leadership in Interfaith space. In her book, *Dear White Christians*, Jennifer Harvey argues that when we define racism as a problem of oppression, we see that the tasks facing the oppressors are very different from the work of the oppressed¹². **Racial justice is not a matter of reaching some “universal common ground,” for our goal is not fairness or impartiality, but liberation from oppressive systems.** Given the historical role of whites in supporting and benefiting from colonialism and slavery, and our ongoing participation in systems of wealth inequity, unhealthy environmental conditions, police brutality and mass

¹² Harvey, Jennifer. (2014). *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.



incarceration, what does it mean for whites to approach Interfaith work with justice as our goal?

Breaking the silence around race must involve changing where our Interfaith gatherings are held (*in mosques or on indigenous sacred land, for example, instead of in churches*). Breaking the silence includes figuring out what whiteness has to do with my faith, and becoming comfortable with the discomfort of naming and owning those connections. Breaking the silence involves re-evaluating the goals of Interfaith work and challenging other whites to join in working to make reparations and interrupt racist oppression.

Conclusion

The beauty and disappointments we experience in Interfaith work moved us to delve more deeply into healing of our own unconscious internalized racial religious superiority and inferiority. It is an ongoing process. We critique the larger Interfaith community because we love the ideals that drew us to it in the first place.

The formation of this offering began with a call and response focused on questions that were very transformative for us in examining the issue of race, racism and silence in Interfaith settings. We invite you to explore these questions individually and in community as a proactive step to begin the work of releasing shame and breaking the silence on racism and religious bias. We encourage you to identify the goals of your Interfaith work and notice if you are settling for tolerance of racially diverse people from different religions. If the answer is yes, we invite you to delve deeper by creating life-affirming liberating spaces that encourages all people to labor against systems of oppression. We hope those who are in a place of privilege within Interfaith spaces are inspired to use their access and institutional power to create change.

Discussion & Reflection Questions

- 1) How and when do you experience being an insider or outsider in Interfaith spaces?
- 2) What is an insider versus an outsider perspective in an Interfaith space?
- 3) What does Internalized Superiority look and feel like in Interfaith spaces?
- 4) How do we mediate our personal spiritual experience when we talk about race in Interfaith community?
- 5) How do our places of identity affect/influence how we show up to address issues of racism in Interfaith community (*internally & externally*)?
- 6) Why is there silence/avoidance around race and racism?
- 7) How does this silence affect who feels welcome or who feels like they have to be less?



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Author Bios

DeShannon Bowens

DeShannon Bowens, M.S., is an initiated Orisa priestess and Awo in the spiritual Yoruba tradition of Ifa. In 2010, she was ordained as an Interfaith-Interspiritual minister through [One Spirit Interfaith Seminary](#) in New York and currently serves as a Dean to first year seminary students. She has a Bachelor's degree in Psychology, Master's degree in Counseling and is an Emeritus Scholar for the Inter-religious on-line publication, [State of Formation](#). DeShannon is also the author of [Hush Hush: An African American Family Breaks their Silence on Sexuality & Sexual Abuse](#) (2007, 2015). Currently, she serves as a professional development trainer and psychotherapist through her organization ILERA. Since its inception in 2004, ILERA has offered: transformative programs on vicarious trauma & wellness, forums to discuss the intersection of sexuality & spirituality, educational programs on sexual abuse prevention and self-development workshops grounded in African spiritual wisdom. Presentations of her work have taken place at Harvard University, Washington University, Interfaith Center of New York, The Children's Aid Society, New York Theological Seminary, University of Connecticut, AASECT, CONNECT and the Values Caucus of the United Nations. Follow her on twitter [@OmiFasina](#) and learn more at <http://ilera.com>.

Elizabeth Simson Durant

Elizabeth Durant, M.Div., is passionate about the ways spirituality can nurture and sustain us in the justice-seeking life. She currently serves as Assistant Minister at First Congregational United Church of Christ in downtown Portland, Oregon. An active member of the Portland chapter of [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#), Elizabeth leads the Central Pacific Conference's [Racial Justice Network](#) and serves as co-chair of the CPC [Justice & Witness Ministry Team](#). Elizabeth writes for the interfaith blog, [State of Formation](#), and her academic work on racial justice, biblical interpretation and interfaith collaboration has led to presentations at regional and national American Academy of Religion conferences. She holds a Master of Divinity degree from Marylhurst University, where she graduated in 2013. Follow her on Twitter [@revelizabdurant](#), read her blog [Racism is a White Problem](#) and learn more at <http://www.elizabethdurant.net/>.

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