



ZENTRUM OEKUMENE

Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau
Evangelische Kirche von Kurhessen-Waldeck

Racism is a Sin!

Theological Foundations for Dealing
with Racism as a Guide for the Work of
the EKHN and EKKW Ecumenical Centre



Our cross
has many colours!



We live in a world in which people experience discrimination, exclusion and racism. Racism is linked to a fundamental questioning of what it means to be human. Racist thinking and the resulting words and actions can also be found in the history of our own church and missionary traditions, as well as in the interpretation of biblical texts in theology and church practice. We look at our own history, knowing that racism is not only a problem belonging to 'others', but also our problem.

Racism is a sin, a break with the God-given way of life. Racism destroys people's relationships with themselves, with each other and with God. We must face up to this, in order to enable positive change in the way people interact with each other in our church, our country and our world.

Racism is linked to a way of speaking, thinking and acting that is colonialist, privileged, prejudiced and motivated by ethnicity. We are therefore looking for biblical reassurance in the context of decoloniality. We understand decoloniality to be a process of societal transformation and liberation. It aims to reveal, combat and dismantle colonial structures at a local and global level.

Biblical confirmation

(all bible quotes are from the New International Version)¹

Racism of any kind denies God and denigrates the unique dignity of each individual. We must admit that: Our bible and our confessional writings also contain exclusionary passages which, if taken literally, could be said to promote racism. We are aware that interpretations of some biblical texts have been and still are used to reinforce colonial and racist structures. However, the overall testimony of the holy scriptures makes very clear that they are based on God's desire for universal salvation, which treats all people and all of creation with mercy. This is both a comfort and a call to strengthen anti-racist biblical traditions as a foundation for our words and actions.

- We declare our faith in a God of whom we must not create images (Exodus 20:4). We should not think of God in categories such as ethnicity, skin colour, language or gender. Our image of God frees us to take an open view of the diversity of people, without exclusion or denigration.
- We believe that we humans are created equal by God (Genesis 1:27). All people are made in the image of God. They are of equal value in their diversity, loved and wanted by God. No-one should be denied their humanity.
- God has given everyone the freedom to act. We know about the human capacity for good or evil behaviour. The bible calls it a sin when people hurt, degrade or exclude others – whether accidentally or intentionally.

¹ <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/new-international-version-niv-bible/>

- The scriptures encourage us with stories in which the limitations of origin, ethnicity, nationality and othering are overcome. Our ancestors set off for an unknown land. They encountered strangers and experienced what it was to be strangers themselves; they overcame boundaries and they were aware of God's unconditional blessing for their departure and their arrival.

- In connection with God's history with the children of Israel, in the tale of their escape from Egypt, we recognise the path out of slavery and towards freedom and justice. This fundamental experience underlines the equality of all people who coexist: 'How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!' (Psalm 133:1). The biblical prophets proclaim a God who makes room for equality: 'A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain."' (Isaiah 40:3–4). 'But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (Amos 5:24).

- God is made human in Jesus Christ. The appreciation and humanity of every individual is reflected in him. Jesus Christ approached people who were considered 'different', or even 'unclean' or 'sinful'. He encounters a woman – in Jesus' time described as a stranger – who shows him his prejudices and his limited view. Jesus learns and changes his behaviour (Matthew 15:25–28).
- The first Christian communities were places for being one in Christ: 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Galatians 3:28).
- Jesus announces the kingdom of God. 'The time has come' (Mark 1:15) and will be completed by God in His world to come. 'God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.' (Revelation 21:3).

Anti-racist work is work for the kingdom of God

In the speech about the kingdom of God, we see the counter-reaction to an attitude of exclusion and isolation. We take inspiration from a movement starting from God and going out into the world ('Missio Dei'). God will transform this world into a place where justice, peace and the safeguarding of creation become a reality for everyone. 'Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.' (Romans 15:7). In this world, people will regard and treat each other in the way that they were created by God: as God's likeness in diversity of language, origin, identity, appearance, as equals among equals. This we hope for in the belief in the existence of the kingdom of God, starting in this world and coming to completion in the next.

Dealing consciously with guilt and imperfection is part of this understanding of working for the kingdom of God. Racist talk and behaviour occurs as a result of carelessness or habit, out of real malice, anger or uncertainty, in which people's own fears are instrumentalised, or out of supposed good intentions. As believers, we trust that God will forgive us our sins.

A church that considers itself a community in Christ must speak up when people act in a discriminatory or racist way. Such actions contradict the belief that all people are made in God's image and the devotion to all people modelled by Christ. This is a part of the work on the kingdom of God, which we are already helping to build today, in this world. We take inspiration from God's Holy Spirit as we work on making liberating changes, in ourselves and in the world.

Our words, thoughts and deeds are just a beginning

The examination of racism is not a one-time act, but an ongoing process. Inspired by the vision of the kingdom of God as the aim of the 'Missio Dei', we put our energy into overcoming racism and all other forms of exclusion, defamation and denigration of individuals. 'Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.' (Philippians 2:3-4). In this way, we work for a fairer world, aiming to love our neighbours and bring about peace. In this context, being a follower of Jesus means continually questioning and reflecting on how we interact with things we find strange and different, changing ourselves and letting ourselves be changed. By listening to and working together with people who have been negatively affected by racism, we hope to experience how small steps can have a great effect, such as in the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:13 ff.) Self-reflection can lead to positive words and deeds. Based on this, we at the Ecumenical Centre have developed a code of conduct. The code and this theological paper will be revised every two years and adjusted, improved or expanded as required. In this process, let us follow the biblical assertion that God has not given us the spirit of fear, but rather of 'power, love and self-discipline'. (2 Timothy 1:7).

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