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# Living in a Christian Dominant Culture: An Exercise[1]

by Paul Kivel

## GUIDELINES FOR GETTING READY

**BEGIN BY TELLING THE** group that you are going to read a series of statements and that each person to whom a statement applies should stand up after that statement is read. Tell the group that everyone is being asked to participate. Those who are physically unable to stand may raise their hand, if they are able, so they are able to indicate that they are part of the group standing.

Each participant should decide for themselves whether the statement applies to them or not.

Participants may choose to pass for any particular statement but should notice feelings they have about not standing.

Explain that the exercise will be done in silence to allow participants to notice the feelings that come up during the exercise and to make it safer for all participants.

After a statement is read and people have stood for a few moments, you may ask them to look around and notice who is standing with them and/or to notice any feelings they have. Ask participants to sit down and then read the next statement.

[1] © 2004 Adapted from Allan Creighton by Paul Kivel with input by Luz Guerra, Nell Myhand, Hugh Vasquez, and Shirley Yee.

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Please stand silently if

1. You have ever attended church regularly.

2. You ever attended Sunday school as a child, or attended church periodically, e.g. during Christian holidays.

3. You ever attended a Christian-based recreational organization as a young person, such as the YMCA or YWCA, or church-based summer camp, or participated in a program of a non-religious youth organization which was based in Christian beliefs such as the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts.

4. You were ever told or instructed by a Christian or by a Christian authority figure such as a minister, priest, teacher, parent, public official, counselor that things that you do with your body, sex with others, or sex by yourself was sinful or unclean.

5. You were ever told by a Christian or Christian authority figure that sexual acts other than intercourse between a man and a woman, or sexual orientations other than heterosexual, are sinful or unclean.

6. You were ever told or instructed by a Christian or Christian authority figure that women are unclean, that women are the source of temptation, or that they are the source of sin or evil.

7. You have ever heard heaven and good described as light or white and hell and evil described as dark or black.

8. You have ever been told something you did was sinful or evil, or that you were sinful or evil.

9. You have ever noticed that a Christian theological either/or framework of good/evil, black/white, sinner/saved is used by you, people around you, or is prominent in mainstream culture.

10. You have ever been approached by family members, friends, or strangers trying to convince you to become Christian, or a Christian of a particular kind?

11. You have ever been rejected in any way by family or community members because you were not Christian, or were not Christian enough?

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12. You have ever found that, in your community, the church is a major center of social life that influences those around you and is difficult to avoid.

13. You have ever taken Christian holidays such as Christmas or Easter off, whether or not you practice them as Christian holidays, or have taken Sunday off or think of it, in any way, as a day of rest.

14. You have ever been given a school vacation or paid holiday related to Christmas or Easter when school vacations or paid holidays for non-Christian religious celebrations such as Ramadan or the Jewish High Holidays were not observed.

15. The public institutions you use, such as offices, buildings, banks, parking meters, the post office, libraries, and stores, are open on Fridays and Saturdays but closed on Sundays.

16. When you write the date the calendar of time you use calculates the year from the birth of Jesus and is divided into two segments, one before his birth and one after it.

17. You have ever seen a public institution in your community, such as a school, hospital, or city hall, decorated with Christian symbols, e.g. Christmas trees, wreathes, Jesus, nativity scenes, or crosses.

18. If you wanted to you could easily find Christian music, TV shows, movies, and places of worship.

19. You can easily access Christmas- or Easter-related music, stories, greeting cards, films, and TV shows at the appropriate times of the year.

20. You have ever received public services—medical care, family planning, food, shelter, or substance abuse treatment from a Christian based organization or that were marked by Christian beliefs and practices, e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous or other 12-step programs, pro-life family planning, or hospitals.

21. You daily use currency which includes Christian words or symbols such as the phrase "in God we trust".[2]

[2] the "god" in this phrase does not refer to Allah, Ogun, Shiva, the goddess, or the great spirit.

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22. You have ever received an educational, job training, job, housing, or other opportunity where Jews, Muslims, Buddhists or other non-Christians were screened out or discriminated against.

23. You have ever been told that a war or invasion, historical or current, was justified because those who were attacked were heathens, infidels, unbelievers, pagans, terrorists, evil, sinners, or fundamentalists of a non-Christian religion.

24. Your foreparents or ancestors were ever subject to invasion, forced conversion, or the use of missionaries as part of a colonization process either in the U.S. or in another part of the world.

25. In your community or metropolitan area, there have been hate crimes against Jews, Muslims, gays, people who are transgender, women, or others based on the perpetrator's Christian beliefs.

26. You have ever attended public non-religious functions, such as civic or governmental meetings, which were convened with Christian blessings, references, or prayers.

27. You have ever been asked or commanded to sing or recite, in public, material which had Christian references such as the Pledge of Allegiance ("One Nation Under God"), "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" ("Our Eyes have seen the Glory…"), or "America, the Beautiful" ("God shed His grace on thee").

28. You have ever heard the U.S. referred to as a Christian or god-fearing country.

29. As a young person, you were ever read or told to read Christian themed stories that were not identified as such for example, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Little House on the Prairie*, *Doctor Doolittle*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Babar*, *Indian in the Cupboard*, or the *Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales*.

30. You or young people you know have ever played video games in which white people colonized, attacked, killed, or "converted" darker skinned people, games in which women

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were physically brutalized or sexually assaulted or games in which there were good guys and bad guys of any kind?[3]

31. You have viewed Christian themed movies that were not identified as such for example, *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, or *Tarzan*.

32. You have ever thought of yourself as non-Christian or not religious, but when you think about it have had a Christian upbringing or have been influenced by Christian rituals and values.

33. You have any feelings of discomfort, reluctance, fear, or shame in talking about the major impact Christianity has had on each of us and on our society.

## GROUP DISCUSSION

**AFTER THE EXERCISE ASK PEOPLE** to pair up to talk about what feelings and thoughts came up for them participating in the exercise.

Reassemble the group and facilitate a group discussion of the feelings, thoughts, reflections, and insights that people want to share.

This is not a stand alone exercise. It should only be conducted in the context of a workshop or talk on racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, imperialism and/or Christian hegemony and power, violence, and safety which allows the group to process the feelings, thoughts, and issues which arise from participating in the exercise.

For further information on these issues see *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel (New Society, revised, 2002); *Helping Teens Stop Violence, Build Community, and Stand for Justice* by Allan Creighton with Paul Kivel (Hunter House, 1992); and *Making the Peace: A 15-Session Violence Prevention Curriculum for Young People* by Paul Kivel & Allan Creighton (Hunter House, 1996).

For information about books and other training and curricular materials or for feedback or questions about this exercise, contact Paul Kivel at 510-654-3015 or at pkivel@mindspring.com, or visit his websites at www.paulkivel.com and www.christianhegemony.org.

[3] The phrase is from Sardar p. 116.

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