



Christian Privilege and the Everyday Impact of Christian Hegemony

*Adapted from **Privilege: A Reader**¹*

Article by Paul Kivel

Introduction:

In the summer of 2012 Muslim Americans experienced numerous violent attacks and harassment such as the burning to the ground of a mosque in Missouri; the firing of an air rifle at the Muslim Education Center in Illinois while 500 people were praying; the throwing of a homemade bomb at a Muslim school in Illinois and a Muslim home in Florida; harassment by teens of worshipers at a California mosque; and the vandalism and desecration of other mosques across the country. The regular occurrence of these attacks, the complicity of public officials with some of them, and the lack of widespread condemnation of the violence make these events visible and dramatic examples of Christian power. The safety that Christians experience is building churches and praying, the lack of harassment and discrimination they experience in work sites, schools, and neighborhoods, and the access they have to political representation, economic and educational opportunities defines Christian privilege.

Christian dominance operates not only through the use of force, but also through the normalization of a culture in which everyday examples of Christianity are pervasive, unquestioned, and often not even recognized as such.

Many of the everyday manifestations of Christian dominance are so normalized and long-standing they are often mistaken as non-Christian or secular. They include:

¹ Kimmel, Michael S. and Abby L. Ferber. *Privilege: A Reader*, 3rd ed. Westview Press, 2013.





* The yearly calendar, which is calculated from the birth of Jesus.

* “Public” holidays such as Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving that dominate public space and attention.

* References to a Christian god on our currency (“in God We Trust”), in the Pledge of Alliance (“one nation, under God”), on the National Seal (“God has favored our undertaking”), the Liberty Bell (“proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants therefore”) and in patriotic songs such as “America the Beautiful” (“God has shed his grace on thee”).

* The closing of public and private buildings, services, stores, and workplaces on Sunday (rather than on Friday or Saturday, the Muslim and Jewish Sabbaths, for example).

* Christian symbols such as crosses and nativity scenes on public buildings and in public spaces.

* The use of Christian prayers in public meetings and events.

* The pervasiveness of phrases such as “Merry Christmas” and “Bless you,” and questions such as “What church do you go to?”

* The control of vast amounts of money, buildings, land, and financial wealth by Christian institutions and the tax-exempt status of those organizations.

What is Christian Hegemony?

Christian hegemony is the everyday, pervasive, and systematic set of Christian values and beliefs, individuals, and institutions that dominate all aspects of our society through the social, political, economic, and cultural power they wield. Nothing is unaffected by it including our personal beliefs and values, our





relationships to other people and to the natural environment, and our public policy.

Dominant Christianity provides a world view—an intellectual framework, a language, and a set of values-- that is promoted as common sense, as just the way things are, as unchallengeable.

The interpersonal effects include the specific acts of discrimination, harassment, and violence directed at those who are not Christian or Christian of the wrong sort e.g. Muslims or people who are LGBTTQ.

The institutional effects show up in the ways that the policies, practices, and procedures of the health care, educational, and criminal/legal systems favor Christians and Christian values and treat those who are not Christian as abnormal, dangerous, and outside society's circle of caring. The interweaving and cumulative impact of Christian dominance in our institutions creates an overall *structure* that is dense, ever-present, and devastating to our society.

Christian hegemony benefits all Christians, all those raised Christian, and those passing as Christian. However the concentration of power, wealth, and privilege under Christian hegemony accumulates to the ruling class and the predominantly white male Christian power elite that serve its

This discussion is not about individual Christian beliefs and spiritual practices. If you are Christian you might feel a need to defend your religion or religious practice. You might want to say that “that” Christianity is not “my” Christianity. As social justice educator Mamta Motwani Accapadi wrote, “Christians cannot willingly dissolve and disown their Christian privilege because of their individual relationship with their Christian identity.”





Christian Allies

An ally is someone who uses their privilege and their resources to stand with those under attack and to dismantle systems of oppression. There have always been Christian dissidents--those individuals and groups who rejected dominant interpretations of the meaning of Christianity or the political, economic, and social role of the church.

There is also a long and honorable social justice tradition in Christianity, derived from the Jewish prophetic tradition in the Bible, which has challenged injustice in its many manifestations. This resistance has continued in the role of Black churches, the development of the social gospel, and the Liberation Theology movement. There are many Christians today working for peace and justice.

In contemporary times, some Christian churches have challenged U.S. wars of aggression, supported majority world liberation struggles, worked for economic, racial, and gender justice, fought for civil and human rights, and worked diligently to challenge Christian hegemony within Christian organizations. They have also created alternative feminist, Black, Native American, Latino, gay, and social justice focused churches and organizations. Christian dissidents and liberation theologians continue to try and reclaim Christianity.

What's a Christian ally to do?

If you are Christian or were raised Christian there are many concrete things you can do to counter Christian hegemony.

- * Learn the history of Christianity and its impact on other peoples
- * Learn the history of the denomination that you belong to and/or grew up in.
- * Understand and acknowledge the benefits you gain from being Christian in the United States.





-
- * Use your privilege to support the struggles of non-Christian peoples throughout the world for land, autonomy, independence, reparations, and justice.
 - * Notice the operation of Christian hegemony in your everyday life.
 - * Learn how to raise these issues with other Christians.
 - * Challenge organizational and institutional policies that perpetuate Christian hegemony.
 - * Challenge public exhibitions of Christianity.
 - * Respect other peoples' sacred places, rituals, sacred objects, and culture—don't appropriate them in any way.
 - * Support the First Amendment separation of church and state and work for religious pluralism.
 - * Challenge missionary programs.
 - * Challenge attempts to justify U.S. imperialism by appeals to the special, superior, or righteous role that the U.S. should play as a Christian, civilized, democratic, free market, or human rights-based society.
 - * Examine the ways that you may have internalized feelings of superiority or negative judgment of others, especially those from marginalized or non-Christian groups based on Christian teachings.
 - * Examine the ways that you may have internalized judgments about yourself based on Christian teachings.
 - * Examine the ways that you may have cut yourself off from your body, from natural expressions of your sexuality or spirituality, from connections to the natural world, or from particular groups, ethnicities, behaviors, or cultures because of Christian teachings.





- * Avoid excusing hurtful behavior or policies because of the good intent of their perpetrators.
- * Look for the complexity in situations and people and avoid reducing things to an artificial either/or dynamic.
- * Don't assume that other people you meet are Christian—or should be.

No living Christian created the system of Christian hegemony that we live within. In that sense no one is guilty. But Christians are responsible for their response to it, for the way that they show up as allies in the struggle to build a just society.

All of us, Christian or not, working to create a world without hate, exploitation and violence must identify the internalization of Christian ideology in our thinking and eliminate its negative consequences from our behavior. In addition, we must learn effective techniques for educating people about Christian hegemony and for organizing to challenge its power.

Finally, we must free ourselves from the restraints it has imposed on our imaginations so that we can establish relationships with ourselves, other people and all living things built on values of mutuality, cooperation, sustainability, and interdependence with all life.

Paul Kivel is an educator, activist and writer with decades of experience working on issues of violence prevention and social justice. His books and curricula include *Uprooting Racism*, *Men's Work*, *You Call This a Democracy?*, *Helping Teens Stop Violence*, *Build Community* and *Stand for Justice and Living in the Shadow of the Cross*. Information about his work, books, and other resources is available at www.paulkivel.com and www.christianhegemony.org.

