

Stopping racism with a smile?

By [Mark Edwards](#)

September 15, 2015

*In our "Reflections From the Classroom" series, seasoned teachers talk about their experiences walking with students and guiding their learning.*

Last semester, I had students review *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, by Michael Emerson and Christian Smith. For those unfamiliar with this book, the authors make two general claims:

- **America is a racialized society.** By “racialized,” Emerson and Smith mean that disparities of economic and educational opportunity, housing and shopping, health and entertainment, personal and family net worth, police and legal protections—all instances of structural inequality—are determined by physiology (along with determining it). The authors convincingly conclude that in our supposedly colorblind, post-racial America, “race matters profoundly.”
- **White evangelical Protestants are unwitting proponents of racialization.** While noting the admirable efforts of some white evangelical Christians to foster interracial fellowship and fight racial injustice since the 1950s, Emerson and Smith document the myriad of ways that those same communities remain bulwarks of structural racism. In one of their more damning discoveries, they survey numerous white evangelicals—from predominantly white neighborhoods, churches, and schools—who are convinced that America no longer has a race problem. When pressed by the authors on why the average net worth of African Americans is much lower than that of white Americans, several interviewees conclude that African Americans simply don’t value hard work or a good education. It never seems to occur to them that such a response is racist.

I assigned this book review for the end of the semester. I had tried this before, and some students had told me later that it had been a life-changing experience for them.

Not so the second time around. This time, the three main lines of personal reaction suggested resistance to change:

- **“You’re just trying to make me feel bad!”** On the one hand, I could sympathize with this perspective, as my students had not participated personally in lynchings, burnings, shootings, or other forms of terrorism visited upon people of color. However, the familiar “white guilt” complaint leveled here is almost always a way for people to avoid hard thinking about what it will take for our country to transcend racial injustice. Thankfully, only one student expressed such indifference.
- **“Why are we still talking about race in 2015?”** While this is another common refrain today, again only one student made this statement. Much like Emerson and Smith’s respondents, this student believed that racism was solely a matter of bad personal attitudes, as reflected in the use of racial slurs, for example. No bad personal attitudes; no racism in America—until African Americans start playing the “blame game.” This deflection of America’s race problem onto the victims themselves is a particular kind of wicked.
- Perhaps most disturbing, however, was the majority reaction. To paraphrase: **“America is a racialized society, so I’m gonna try to be nicer to people who look different than me.”** Perhaps students wrote their reviews too late at night, or perhaps I should have assigned the book earlier in the term. But most students didn’t notice the disconnect between their summation of America’s structural race inequalities and their misplaced faith in the power of personal good will to overcome those inequities. That divide between public problem and private solution has plagued white evangelicalism since its inception, as Emerson and Smith repeatedly observe in their book. You can’t stop racism with a smile.

Perhaps I’m being too hard on my class. I’m sure that the white Christian young people who joined civil rights organizations during the 1950s and 1960s were

similarly naive at first. Certainly they were surprised to find how endemic, brutal, and institutional racism can be when it's challenged.

At the same time, they quickly learned the lessons of veteran African American organizers: that you had to win the keeper of the country's international reputation—the federal government—over to your side. The civil rights movement defied the evangelical logic that personal and cultural change must always precede political revolution. They proved that the opposite was often true.

There are many encouraging signs that Christian college students are willing to take action on pressing social issues, such as climate change and human trafficking. Without a more robust education in American government and politics, however, I'm afraid they'll offer little help in dismantling our racialized society.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#), [Beth Hessel](#), and [John D. Wilsey](#).*