

All Church Read: *How to Be an Antiracist*

Historical and Cultural Context Video – Chapters 1-6 by Dr. Renee K. Harrison

TRANSCRIPT

Good day everyone or evening whenever you find yourself viewing this particular video segment. I am Dr. Renee K. Harrison associate professor of African American and U.S religious history at the Howard University. I'm so excited to be with you during this video discussion or segment or series as part of Join the Movement towards Racial Justice as we delve into this work *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. Are you ready to dig in because I'm ready to dig in and I'm hoping on the other side of this and other conversations over the next few months you will find a deeper meaning for yourself of what it means to be a racist or an antiracist in these United States of America. Are you ready? Let's get started!

We are going to move through chapters one through six during this first video segment. You see, in the first six chapters Kendi essentially argues one is either racist or antiracist; there is nothing in between. All of us at some point fall somewhere on this binary spectrum. And Kendi does something unique here; he provides his own definitions of racist and antiracist. He essentially says that a racist is one who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea, that is, they are contributing to a history that regards and treats different races as inherently inferior. He goes on to say that an antiracist is one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an anti-racist idea. An antiracist is committed to dismantling that history. So I want to put this all in historical context because as I read through the first six chapters what began to kind of push my thinking was how do we, in 2023, take on this racist/antiracist spectrum without acknowledging on a very deep and profound level that racism, however defined, must include centuries of internal cultural damage that is not only working on systems and structures but also the ways in which those systems and structures have harmed the culture. And when I say that I mean that is the ways of living while black for generations.

I'm gonna put this even more in historical context because Kendi, a 40-year-old black man was born on August 13, 1982, and as he moves through the first six chapters he alludes to the racist practices that he, his parents to some degree, and other Americans, both black and white, engaged in. And so as I moved with him on the racist to antiracist spectrum what became more apparent to me was what was missing. The violent and traumatic historical realities of racism are also crucial in this journey from racist to antiracist. Such realities must be disclosed and contact our lives in their full light before

and beyond Kendi's memoir. We must take into deep consideration and reflection the pain and anguish, the harm and hardship, the downright trauma and righteous discontent that many black and brown people are still experiencing and feeling because of unresolved racist acknowledgment and actions about power structures instituted by people in this country. We cannot gloss over this on our reflective journey to antiracism. Racism is alive and well in this country. One only needs to look at the recent events in Tennessee where two black lawmakers, one a black man, one a black Filipino man, were expelled by majority white GOP superpower for protesting gun violence after the fatal killing of three nine-year-olds and three adults at an elementary school in Nashville - a Christian school in Nashville. Keep in mind that same GOP white power structure chose not to expel the one white female lawmaker that was a part of the protest. You see we must take the past and the present in historical context and address the longevity of violence and trauma against and upon black and brown peoples.

And I'm going to put this even more historical context because I wanted us to take a look at on August 13, 1955, on the same day 27 years before Kendi was born, Lamar Smith, a 63-year-old farmer and World War II or I veteran, was shot dead in cold blood on the crowded courthouse lawn in Brookhaven Mississippi for urging local African Americans to vote in a local runoff election. No one was prosecuted and in September, two months later, a grand jury of 20 white men declined to convict the three suspects for murder. Smith's death did not happen in a vacuum. I'm gonna say that again: Smith's death did not happen in a vacuum. And I'm gonna come off screen because I want you to feel the next few words I'm about to offer as I talk about just a snippet of this violent reality that black people had to face or have to face in this country from slavery to present. Smith's death did not happen in a vacuum. The racist policies instituted by racist people who were a part of a racist system made way for his death in 1955 and the subjugation of Kendi's and Smith's forebears since the founding of this country.

Racist policies have been embedded in the hearts and minds of the early founders and immigrants and therefore America's institutions. The stratification of race by early European settlers, most of whom were Christians, set up the conditions by which 11.9 to 12.5 million black skin tone people - and some scholars estimate higher numbers than the numbers I've just offered - but these people were deemed inferior based on racialized constructions defined by white people. This stratification and the case for American slavery was solidified not only by the Hamite curse that Kendi points us to but other biblical passages that Europeans use to justify their righteous practices. I'm going to give you some of those scriptures. You ready?
Leviticus 25 and 44

Romans 13:1-5
Titus 3 and 1
Titus 2 and 9
I Peter 2:18
Colossians 3:22
I Corinthians 7:21-22
Ephesians 6 and 5
just to name a few.

It wasn't just biblical texts that they used but it was also two Papal Bulls, that is, formal letters issued by the Pope one called the *Dum Diversas* written on June 18, 1452 and *Romanus Pontifex* the bull written in 1455 that authorized King Alfonso of Portugal the right – hear these words – “to invade, search out, capture, vanquish and subdue pagans and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed and to seize all kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by these groups and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery.” The Pope, the bull sanctioned by the church, issued by the Pope, made the enslavement of black people permissible. This understanding of invasion, seizing, and reducing black and brown bodies to perpetual slavery was and still is, in some cases, ingrained in the ethos of the United States of America.

Even just moving from the Pope, President Jefferson Davis’ statement sums it up best when he says “Slavery was established by almighty God; it is sanctioned in the Bible (as the scriptures I just read), in both Testaments from Genesis to Revelation, Jefferson Davis says. And then the Reverend Alexander Campbell, prominent Antebellum minister during slavery put it best when he said there is not one verse in the Bible inhibiting slavery but many other verses regulate the practice. “Is it not then,” Campbell says, “that we conclude, is it not then, we conclude immoral?”

The racialized stratification and subjugation of black and brown bodies was not only a part of the ethos of the American church and also the church in Europe but the seat of the U.S government. 12 of the first 18 U.S presidents did - you know this, get ready - 12 of the first 18 U.S presidents who served before the Reconstruction Era, let me give you those dates, who served before 1789 starting with Washington himself leading all the way up to 1877 (that's a long time) 12 owned black people. And most of them brought some of their enslaved blacks with them to the White House. Black people's enslavement in America cannot be seen absent also of the centuries of lynchings and rape and breeding and other acts of violence. Post-slavery alone black people were seen as disposable and the laws were in the hands of every white man, and in some cases white women. In 1836 for example, one year after Chief Justice John Marshall's death -

and let me emphasize here, just as the first 12 presidents were slave owners so were the first justices - but after Marshall's death, Roger Brook Taney became the Chief Justice. And when the Dred Scott Decision reached the Supreme Court, the justices then ruled seven to two against Scott and Taney wrote in his majority opinion finding neither Scott nor any other person of African descent, enslaved or free, were citizens. Black people, Taney wrote, were a subordinate and inferior class of beings and had no right or privileges but such as those granted by white people. Dred Scott died in 1858 merely one year after the Supreme Court's decision. So that is just a snippet of how the power structure ingrained in the early founding of this country [said] that black people had no merit. So Smith's death did not happen in a vacuum.

For centuries black lives, from the time of American slavery to the present, have been defined, regulated, and prosecuted in nearly all aspects of American institutions. Although there were vital turning points in American history at which American institutions sought to right their wrongs against black people, these institutions harmed black lives. And behind the veil of democracy and fairness is the reality of a cruel, calculated Antebellum world that held black people in bondage for centuries. In a present-day world that continues to kill black people in cold blood, Smith's story is America's story and the day-to-day reality of many black people even to today. Kendi has a hope in an antiracist world. I commend him. On a good day sometimes I have hope too. But how do we, how much more powerful would this text be if told by a white person telling his or her journey from racism to antiracism and urging his allies and friends and family members to do the same! I argue in essence that people drive policy and racist and indifferent people form and sustain racist institutions. It's both the people and the power structure.

I hope Kendi's work and this video segment generate meaningful dialogue and reflection. I leave you in this first segment of our discussion, in looking at Chapters 1-6, I leave you with these probing internal questions and three final ones for you to consider.

1. Kendi begins his discussion on racism by starting with his own ongoing racist and antiracist journey. What does it mean for a black man to begin with his awareness and acknowledgment of racist thoughts, practices, and behaviors to awaken readers to do the same? Does such starting point soften the realities of historical racism in the U.S and give those who have benefited and continue to benefit from racist policies a soft landing and even a pass?
2. As I read through Chapters 1-6, I began to ask myself as a black same gender loving woman, are my awareness, acknowledgment, and engagement in anti-racist practices enough to change behavior and help move us towards dismantling the white power structure and anti-black policies that subjected my

forebears and present-day people to discrimination or do American institutions themselves, built by racist people who had racist policies in mind, need to be simply torn down and rebuilt by a new generation and perhaps more woke antiracist people?

And my final questions that I offer you in this final segment... I leave this segment with three questions that I am asking each of us to ask ourselves:

1. How am I practicing racism or antiracism?
2. Who and what shaped my journey on this spectrum?
3. How would I road map my journey?

I am grateful for this opportunity to be with you today and again I hope on the other side of all the discussions that are yet to come it brings you to a place of deep self-reflection not only about ourselves but about this country and where we want to land in a more Democratic society, in a society that leaves our children better off than when they began on this journey towards racial justice. Have a good day everyone.