



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN  
WORKPLACE SPIRITUALITY AND FULFILLMENT

# Antiracist Leadership

*A Spiritual Approach  
to Diversity, Equity,  
and Inclusion*

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Douglas J. Cremer

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# Palgrave Studies in Workplace Spirituality and Fulfillment

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*To Phyllis Ann*

## PREFACE

Antiracist leadership is at a crossroads. Much progress has been made in the direction of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and the success has created the inevitable backlash. Much good work has been accomplished, along with some missteps and a few excesses, while the caricatures and unabashed critiques have proliferated, arrogantly taking advantage of the human limitations we all have. Decried as “wokeism” and “reverse racism,” leadership in antiracist initiatives has been pummeled by those seeking opportunities for self-advancement and retrograde successes. The opponents of diversity, equity, and inclusion cannot be ignored, neither can their overblown assaults on critical race theory, diverse reading lists, and open discussions of difference. Those of us dedicated to work in this area need resources, support, and new ways of thinking through the issues surrounding our antiracist efforts. The drain on our energy, our optimism, and our strength has taken a toll. Not only are renewed material and organizational resources needed, so are intellectual and spiritual resources that can sustain us for the next effort.

This book seeks to provide some of those intellectual and spiritual supports. Taking a little self-criticism to heart, as good spiritual reflection often does, it offers a way of seeing, choosing, and acting, I hope, that will refresh our minds, expand our vision, and open new paths to choose from, all with the aim of increasing the efficacy and efficiency of our antiracist actions and collaborations. We need to see what has been

accomplished clearly and where we have been incomplete in our imaginations and practices, to choose a new set of options and possibilities, and to act with others on a path of determination and inclusion. We ought to take our spirituality seriously in this endeavor, whether in the general sense of our spirit, what the Greeks referred to as “pneuma,” breath, our life force, or in the more specific sense of our religious traditions, particularly the Christian tradition that has informed, for good and for ill, so much of the way we see the world, even in secular modernity.

A spiritual approach to antiracist leadership requires an open mind and a welcoming spirit. We will challenge some ingrained assumptions and explore some obvious contradictions. We will reconsider our language and examine our practices. We will look to reset our spiritual vision and reveal some new ways of imagining ourselves and our future. We will all begin to set out on a new and challenging path, where the future is to be determined, not by a specific and concrete plan of action, but by adopting an open and collaborative approach, one that itself reflects the very diversity, equity, and inclusion we seek. Spiritual work requires an assessment and alignment of means and ends, where the work models the results and calls them into being. Such are my hopes for this book, a walking together that I hope you will undertake with me.

Pasadena, USA

Douglas J. Cremer



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been conceived, let alone realized, without the love, support, and encouragement of my wife, Phyllis Ann, who brought me into her Afro-American family almost forty years ago. Our daily life together, filled with questions and conversations about faith, family, and leadership, informs this work in so many ways, both visible and invisible. This work is dedicated to her. Our daughters, Isabel and Samantha, have also taught me much about navigating a world defined by racism and sexism in myriad ways. The collective wisdom and insight of these three women have changed me, led me, and shaped this work in untold ways. I am forever grateful for their intelligence, affection, and encouragement. My mother, Marilyn Cremer, and my mother-in-law, Edna Bartholomew, have also been sources of love and wisdom over many years and helped form my ideas on Christianity, racism, and leadership in countless ways over multiple conversations and discussions, but most of all through their example. Being part of an extended family means that our lives together have shaped me and my writing in ways I can hardly calculate. To them, my late father James Cremer, my sister Lisa Campbell and her husband Darrin, my brothers Steven and Craig Cremer, my sister-in-law Ava Hein and her husband Jeff, my sister-in-law Ivy Coker and her husband Pete, my brother-in-law Bill Bartholomew, and my cousin-in-law Theresa Thomas and her late husband Iris, I owe nothing but love and gratitude for all they have given to me freely and lovingly over these many years.

My colleagues over my more than thirty years at Woodbury University in Burbank, California, H. Eric Schockman, David Dauwalder, Reuben Ellis, Emerald Archer, Marty Tippins, Elizabeth Cooper, Joan Marques, Satinder Dhiman, Zelda Gilbert, Randy Stauffer, Joye Swan, Benoush McKay, Elizabeth Sandberg, and Will McConnell have given me much experience and many conversations about the nature and responsibilities of leadership. My professors and colleagues at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, where I completed a master's in theology in 2020, Brett Hoover, Layla Karst, Matthew Petrusek, Douglas Christie, Kim Harris, Tracy Tiemeier, and Thomas Rausch, SJ, allowed me the freedom to explore the connection between Christianity and racism more deeply and supported my investigations with strong foundations and sharp critiques. Early versions of Chapters Three and Four in particular are built on extensions of my master's thesis, *Towards and Antiracist Theology: American Racism and Catholic Social Thought*, accessible at <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/924/>. My colleagues in the Los Angeles Evangelical-Catholic Dialogue group, Mel Robeck, Patsy Robeck, Allan Deck, SJ, Doug Nason, Dave Gable, Thomas Rausch, SJ, and Becky King Cerling, have all helped shape my ideas on faith, leadership, and organization. My colleagues in the program in Deacon Formation in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Ramon Nuñez, Memo Rodriguez, Brian Conroy, Ricardo Mora, Oscar Corcios, Melecio Zamora, and Chris Amantea, as well as Carmen Ramos, Jim Clarke, and Felix Just, SJ, have provided spiritual support and fruitful conversations on faith and leadership over the years, as have my friends in ministry, Juliette Marsh, Bill Shaules, Fausto Sanchez, Modesto Perez, Edwin Duyshart, Edwina Clay, and Charles and Cynthia Mitchell.

This has been a work in development since 2019. In that year, I published "Mercy, Justice, and Reconciliation: Pope Francis, Inclusive Leadership, and the Roman Catholic Church" in *Peace, Reconciliation and Social Justice Leadership in the 21st Century (Building Leadership Bridges, Vol. 8)*, H. Eric Schockman, Vanessa Hernández, and Aldo Boitano, eds., Leeds, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 37-48. It forms the basis for Chapter Seven. My wife, Phyllis A. Cremer, and I in 2021 co-authored a paper, "Western Wisdom Traditions and Workplace Spirituality" that appeared in *The Palgrave Handbook of Workplace Well-Being*, Satinder K. Dhiman, ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 465-487, which forms the basis for Chapter Five. In the same year, I published "The Recovery of Mystery or Liturgy as Aporia" in *Worship*

95: 72-89, which forms the basis of Chapter Six. All of these articles have been extensively reworked and their ideas applied to the concept of antiracist leadership and spirituality. My thanks to all the editors and readers of these publications who challenged me to sharpen and focus my arguments and inspired this larger work.

A shortened abstract of this book, part of an experiment in dialogue, was offered to the International Leadership Conference's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Virtual Summit in June 2023. My co-participants Tina Ragland, Ama Cruz, and Sharletta Green helped shape the organizational structure used in this book with their sharp eyes and critical comments. A second condensed version of this argument was made at the 17th Conference of the International Society for the Study of European Ideas (ISSEI) held at the Katholische Akademie of Berlin in July 2023. The participants in that conference, Edna Rosenthal, Ruvik Rosenthal, Neri Sevenier, Gesine Palmer, Wayne Cristaudo, Martin C. K. Chung, Theodor Damian, Francis Raska, Benedikt Haller, Simone Raudino, Marianna Papastephanou, Gerson Gal, Heinz-Uwe Haus, Peter Zazzali, Iddo Landau, Victor Castellani, and Jürgen Lawrenz, all provided engaging insights and critiques and helped sharpen the argument made here in many ways. The paper given there appeared online in 2024 as part of the conference proceedings as "‘Walking Together:’ Can Racism Be Overcome by a Postsecular Spirituality?" in *The European Legacy*, 1–16. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10848770.2024.2301870>. Lastly, the editors and readers at Palgrave Macmillan, especially Marcus Ballenger, who shepherded this project from proposal to conclusion, have my deepest gratitude.

To all of them, much credit for inspiring and assisting me in this work is to be given, and all of the limitations and shortcomings ascribed to me alone.

# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
	<i>References</i>	14
<b>Part I Seeing</b>		
<b>2</b>	<b>Struggling to Change: The Limits of Antiracist Leadership</b>	<b>17</b>
	<i>Personal Bias</i>	20
	<i>Social Construction</i>	27
	<i>Models of Change</i>	34
	<i>References</i>	40
<b>3</b>	<b>Leadership in a Crisis: Racism as an Existential Problem</b>	<b>43</b>
	<i>Naming “Race”</i>	46
	<i>Understanding Racist Ideology</i>	55
	<i>Using Critical Race Theory</i>	61
	<i>References</i>	65
<b>Part II Choosing</b>		
<b>4</b>	<b>A Spiritual Approach: Racism and Christianity</b>	<b>71</b>
	<i>Catholic Social Thought</i>	76
	<i>Protestant Social Gospel</i>	79
	<i>Renewed Human Dignity</i>	85
	<i>References</i>	94

<b>5</b>	<b>Resetting Expectations: An Appreciation of Darkness</b>	97
	<i>Darkness as Source and Origin</i>	99
	<i>Darkness as Suffering and Comfort</i>	105
	<i>Darkness and Relationship</i>	110
	<i>References</i>	116
	<b>Part III Acting</b>	
<b>6</b>	<b>Embracing Conflict: Dealing with the Inevitable Tensions</b>	121
	<i>Saying and Believing</i>	124
	<i>Mystery as Aporia</i>	131
	<i>Efficacy and Efficiency</i>	135
	<i>References</i>	139
<b>7</b>	<b>Creating an Antiracist Organization: Leading Through Reconciliation</b>	141
	<i>The Way of Francis</i>	142
	<i>Racism and Ecology</i>	148
	<i>Courage and Leadership</i>	154
	<i>References</i>	163
<b>8</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	165
	<b>Index</b>	171

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Douglas J. Cremer is a teacher and professor who has lived and worked in and around Los Angeles, California, for more than thirty years. I believe that one of the foundational assumptions of this work is that we all begin speaking and writing from our social position, a combination of our individual and familial histories, our educational and occupational experiences, our spiritual and religious traditions, and our cultural and ethnic heritages. My other roles as an administrator (an academic chair and dean), preacher (a Roman Catholic deacon), and writer (of several academic articles, chapters, and essays) are all informed by that calling. Being a teacher means most of all meeting my students, and all with whom I meet and speak, where they are at in their lives at the moment we meet. That means beginning by listening, by getting to know people's interests, cares, problems, and joys, and by letting them know who I am as well. I cannot teach, lead, preach, or write without knowing who I am addressing, and them knowing me. It also means creating space and time for them to learn, to respond in their own ways and at their own pace, to what I have to offer them. It means responding to actual people who have been entrusted to my care, not some ideal or model of who they are, but who they really are as individual people. This informs all of my practices, in the classroom, in the office, and in the church. My different roles all overlap and influence each other, as I believe all of our different roles do so in our lives.

I was born, raised, and educated in Southern California, a husband to Phyllis (since 1987) and father to two adult daughters, Bella and Sam. Before we had our children, we lived for a year in Augsburg, Germany. Our family is a mixed one: I am of Sicilian and Scottish descent, my wife is of African and Native American descent, and our daughters are a wonderful mixture of our own heritages. Our families before us have experienced different levels of marginality. At the same time, we have been blessed with consistent support and love and achieved high levels of education (both my wife and I hold doctorate degrees as well as two master's degrees each) and professional success. I have traveled and taught extensively in several European (Paris, Berlin, Rome, and Barcelona) and Chinese (Beijing and Nanjing) cities. In 2014, I was ordained as a Roman Catholic deacon, and in addition to teaching at Woodbury, teach aspiring deacon candidates, who are preparing for their own ordination, and their wives.

Our faith (Phyllis and I are both lifelong Catholics) has fully shaped our lives together. I served as the founding dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Woodbury University for more than twelve years. Among many other duties, I oversaw and taught in the Master of Organizational Leadership program. I am current in contemporary areas of world history, politics, philosophy, religious studies, theology, and education. My academic specialties are in contemporary theories of gender, political violence, racism, and terrorism, modern Catholic and Christian theology and history, European and Asian intellectual, political, and social history, and contemporary higher education pedagogical and study abroad strategies. I have taught recent seminars that include studies of racism, slavery, civil war, terrorism, and pandemics. My articles and reviews have been published in *The European Legacy*, *Worship*, *Catholic Historical Review*, *Journal of Church and State*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and *America: the Jesuit Review*. My recent works include studies of liturgical leadership and community, patriarchy and religion, workplace well-being, Catholic feminism, and justice and reconciliation in the Catholic Church.

What I then bring to this work is a perspective fully informed by this experience. As someone who is conventionally identified as “white” while also having a consciousness of being in some contexts “not quite white,” and while also being an intimate part of an extended “black” family for more than half my life, I live at the intersection of the ideology of “race” on a daily basis. Having to learn from my wife and her family how to talk with our daughters about the complexities of their own heritage and

the challenges their appearance creates for them has been a transformative experience. Without the spiritual nourishment of our faith, in all its complexity and expressions, I am not sure how we would have built such a strong foundation for our family. I am convinced that a spiritual approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion is essential to effective antiracist leadership. I hope that what follows expresses that conviction and leads the reader to seek the same in whatever individual and familial history, educational and occupational experience, spiritual and religious tradition, and cultural and ethnic heritage they bring to this work.





## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

We live in a time of tension. Pressures, challenges, and confrontations surround us. We are asked to reexamine our assumptions, reconsider our history, and realign our priorities. These challenges come from multiple directions: calls for justice that address long-standing inequities based on traditional preferences and prejudices, resistance to change that disrupts our conventional beliefs and habitual practices, and conflict about identities that shift and change with new awareness and advocacy. Our instinctual response is to try and resolve these tensions, to end them once and for all, and in the meantime to try to find an equilibrium amidst all of this turmoil. We speak of this equilibrium as a balance, a harmonious condition poised between two polar positions. While such efforts have a long and dignified pedigree, this book will argue that they are not enough. Instead of seeking balance, especially a balance that neutralizes tension in a fleeting moment, we ought to look for different ways to live within this tension, to embrace the contradictions and challenges of our present moment. Life, after all, is all about existing within tension, the tension of muscles that allow us to stand, the tension of blood flow and energy exchanges, and the tension of hopes and expectations awaiting fulfillment. Balance may be one way to understand tension, but it is not the only way. In fact, we have multiple ways available to us in order to learn to live within the tensions of our times. A spiritual approach, one

informed by traditions and practices that go well beyond the creation of modern ideologies and conflicts, can provide another path, one that looks to use the tensions of our times creatively, responsively, and more importantly, justly.

This book looks at one particular tension characteristic of our time: the enduring legacy and oppressive action of the ideology of racism. Antiracist leadership requires, as the words indicate, opposing this racism, understanding its structure and origins, and addressing its deficits and destruction. This is one of the preeminent challenges of the early twenty-first century. We have opposed racism through protest, demonstration, legislation, conversation, regulation, dialogue, and violence. We have based this opposition on traditional, liberal, conservative, and progressive political values. We have strived to repudiate the legacy of racism, to reframe our perceptions of difference, and to remove the vestiges of a racist worldview. All the while, we have conventionally reaffirmed the reality of “race,” allowed the ideology of “race” to shape our consciousness, and persisted in using the language of “race” in our efforts to overcome racism. In her reflection on Catholic social teaching and the problem of racism, Dawn Nothwehr (2008), mirroring the practice of many contemporary sociologists, as Ali Rattansi (2020) notes, develops the practice of marking “race” in scare quotes as a sign of its conceptual and scientific illegitimacy, as discussed below, and this book follows this practice. The scare quotes are to remind us constantly of this tension between the illusion of “race” and the reality of racism, the ideology that gives this illusion of “race” real power and viciousness in our daily lives.

There has been a long, at times frustrating, at times effective, struggle, led by those who have suffered most from the regime of “race” and its violent implementation. In the United States, and its colonial antecedents, ideas of “race” have justified oppression, enslavement, and elimination of indigenous peoples whose ancestors had been on the land for thousands of years, of forced immigrants from Africa who had been imprisoned and shipped over the Atlantic, of other immigrants from Asia and Latin America whose labor was stolen, and humanity questioned (Hartman 2007; Schermerhorn 2018). Above all, these ideas of “race” have allowed Europeans, as well as immigrants from Europe and their descendants throughout the world, to imagine themselves as superior to all these others and as entitled to exploit them in whatever way would serve their desires and interests. This is another inherent tension often left