

“Dr. George Yancey argues that the two paths of colorblindness and antiracism have not worked and will not work to solve the country’s problems and heal its pain resulting from a racialized society. Dr. Yancey contends that the path of colorblindness ignores racialized problems, and the path of antiracism causes a racially hostile society to be even more hostile and polarized instead of bringing ethnically diverse people together. Dr. Yancey argues for a third path that he calls ‘mutual accountability/responsibility’ or ‘collaborative conversations.’ This approach invites ethnically diverse image-bearers to be proactive and take personal responsibility to enter into collaborative conversations with the intent of working together with all ethnically diverse image bearers of goodwill to solve racialized problems. For those interested in getting off the paths of colorblindness and antiracism, Dr. Yancey’s book offers a third path to help God’s image bearers get closer to the promised land of both racial healing and a racially fair society.”

**Jarvis J. Williams**, associate professor of New Testament interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There is not a more theologically sound, empirically informed, well-reasoned, or rational voice addressing the complexities of race, class, and culture in America today than that of Dr. George Yancey. In *Beyond Racial Division*, he navigates nuance and effectively challenges readers to get beyond rhetoric to results in their engagement of diverse others. As did Christ with arms outstretched, Yancey herein seeks to unite motivations and to hold Christ-followers in tension so that we might walk a more productive path for the sake of the gospel, and in so doing lead others away from painful polarization, beyond the crippling distinctions of this world that otherwise divide.”

**Mark DeYmaz**, cofounder, president, and CEO of the Mosaix Global Network, author of *Building a Healthy Multi-Ethnic Church*

“Our racial division and inequality are extreme. In the midst of such challenges, we shout, we accuse, we point fingers, we divide into camps. And we get nowhere. Dr. Yancey proposes an alternative, rooted deeply in Christian understanding and sociological knowledge. He offers hope and clarity for our times. A must-read.”

**Michael O. Emerson**, professor and head of the sociology department at the University of Illinois Chicago and coauthor of *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*

“Race relations in the United States are mired in acrimony, tribalism, and polarization. What is really needed as a key first step is the pursuit of better listening to one another. Yancey’s *Beyond Racial Division* is a sensitive and sane proposal for how to go there while assessing current options with care and balance. It presents a distinctive third way. If you read one book on issues tied to race, this is it.”

**Darrell L. Bock**, executive director for cultural engagement at the Hendricks Center for Christian Leadership and Cultural Engagement, senior research professor of New Testament studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

**GEORGE YANCEY**

**BEYOND  
RACIAL  
DIVISION**

**A UNIFYING  
ALTERNATIVE TO  
COLORBLINDNESS  
AND ANTIRACISM**



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## INTRODUCTION

**IMAGINE THAT YOU ARE ON A JOURNEY.** You are headed toward a specific destination. Suddenly you come to a fork in the road. You see two clear paths ahead of you, but both make you uncomfortable. You consider the first path. As you look down it, you cannot tell whether it reaches your destination. You ask questions of some who have walked this path before. They say it just circles around back to the start. Oh, it is a pleasant enough path, easily trod. But no matter how long people walk on it, they get no closer to their objective. While this path may be a nice comfortable walk, it will not help you reach your goal.

You look at the other path. It seems to head toward your destination but appears dark and foreboding. Fewer people have returned from this path. Those who have come back warn of dangerous animals ready to pounce. Even though it seems to offer a way to where you want to go, it is a conflict-filled path. You watch as more individuals weaponize to protect themselves. No one comes back to tell you they made it to the end. You do not have any good choices.

Either you select the path leading nowhere or the path full of wild animals.

But then you see a third path! You did not notice this one before. You can see your destination, but brush and fallen debris block the way. There are no signs of wild animals, which brings you relief, but this path is a difficult one. Few if any have traveled this way before. You could ignore this path and choose one of the others, but if you do, it will be harder to get back to this promising third path.

This book offers a way to travel the third path. The path that goes nowhere represents racial colorblindness, which ignores the damage our racialized society has sustained. It seems an easy path, but ultimately it sends us around in circles. The path full of dangerous animals represents anti-racism. Evidence suggests that antiracism creates more racial hostility and polarizes us more than it brings us together. The third path is the mutual accountability approach. It promises to be hard. Since not many people have traveled this path, we cannot know all the problems that await us. But we know the other two paths do not work. So why not take this new path?

This illustration reveals the options before us. In these pages I will point out evidence and highlight arguments that support mutual accountability. There is a lot of work involved in implementing this approach, but research indicates it is a superior way to solve our racial problems. This path becomes more difficult to find the longer we stay on the pathways of colorblindness and anti-racism. Those efforts have failed, and the longer we pursue them, the harder it is to transition to something with more potential. By the time you reach the

end of this book, I hope you will have decided to join me on this journey and see what it holds for us.

### **CAN WE HAVE A BETTER SOCIETY?**

Many of us are tired of fighting the same racial battles over and over again. We are tired of waiting for the next racial controversy to generate more animosity and hostility. We are tired of running into old ideologies that do not serve us well. We are tired of hearing the same arguments and getting nothing done. Those who endorse colorblindness immediately blame those who want to be proactive in dealing with racial issues. Those with an antiracism mindset blame those who are not as active as they are. Those groups talk past each other. Those who are not comfortable with either approach have not been able to find a different path forward and just watch the ongoing conflict. I am going to describe that third path.

If we can stop talking past each other and instead talk to each other, I believe change is possible. We can let the next racial incident lead to a real conversation that brings us together rather than rips us asunder. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe there is no solution and we are trapped in racial polarization. But I refuse to accept that fatalism, which says this is all there is. Yes, this is all there is if we refuse to move out of the colorblindness-antiracism dichotomy. But we do not have to stay here. We can either keep doing what we are doing, or we can try a novel approach. An approach that has not been utilized nearly enough but one we have good reason to think will be effective. If we can develop a movement based on mutual

accountability, then we will finally have a chance to break out of our destructive racial cycle.

### **WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?**

In the subsequent chapters I will more explicitly point out the failures of our previous efforts, rooted mostly in attempts at either colorblindness or antiracism. But for some individuals I do not need to point out these shortcomings. There is a group that wants to address unfair racial outcomes in our society, and ignoring these outcomes is not attractive to them. But they know the antiracism method does not help construct the type of atmosphere where sustainable change is possible. These are “my people.” They are the ones looking for a third path, one that does not ignore the racialization of our society but does not drive individuals away with heavy-handed anti-racism approaches either.

Of course, many individuals committed to colorblindness are so dedicated that nothing I say will move them. Let’s say this is 15 to 20 percent of this country. There is probably a similar-size group committed to antiracism. If this estimation is correct, then 60 to 70 percent of the country may be open to new ways of thinking. Many realize, as I have come to realize, that these paths are going nowhere and instead intensify our racial conflict. Others may favor one approach over the other but still have doubts about it. Wherever you fall, I encourage you to consider a new way of dealing with racial alienation.

Finally, let me tackle a potential barrier for some readers. This book is written by a Christian and published by a Christian publishing house. It is tempting to say the issues brought

forward here apply only to Christians. I disagree. Throughout this book I will rely on my personal ideas and empirical research to argue that a mutual accountability model is superior to both colorblindness and antiracism. It is true that my Christian theological beliefs inspired my original considerations of the mutual accountability model, yet my confidence grew as I looked at real-world evidence. It is also true that several of my examples involve Christians and Christian settings. I use chapter six to outline my theological arguments, and that chapter can be valuable for motivating believers to adopt mutual accountability to address racial issues. But if Christianity is not your thing, skip that chapter. In the remaining chapters, I write for a wider audience to give these ideas a fair hearing.





## WE NEED A NEW PATH

**WHO AM I**, and why should you even listen to me? I am a black man. When you are a black man in the United States, it is difficult to escape your racial status. So it should not be surprising that soon after receiving my doctorate in sociology I started conducting research on issues of race and ethnicity. About fifteen years ago I believed I had reached the pinnacle of my career as a race scholar with the publication of two important books (Emerson & Yancey, 2010; Yancey, 2006). Well, at least *I* thought they were important. Not a lot of other people did. I knew the ideas in those books did not conform to traditional ways of thinking about race for either conservatives or progressives. Although the books have generated enough interest to keep them in circulation, they have had a limited audience. Since I felt I had said all I had to say on racial issues, I went on to write and talk about other matters, deciding I would never again do serious writing on racial issues.

Well, “never” does not last as long as one might think. Here I am doing serious writing on race again. Why? What brought me back? On February 23, 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was gunned

down while on a run. We had seen shootings of black men before, but this one bothered me more than most. Selfishly, maybe, because I work out by cycling and could see myself in a position like that of Arbery. That is less true in other cases, such as the events involving Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Trayvon Martin. But Arbery's killing alone was not enough to drag me back into the fray. It also took the murder of George Floyd on May 25. Perhaps it was being under Covid-19 lockdown. Perhaps it was having two such killings so close together that resonated with me. I cannot say for certain what it was, but it made me tired. I checked out of social media and the news for about three weeks.

When I came back to paying attention and opened myself up to others, I was astounded. All of the sudden I was being contacted by groups wanting to talk to me or have me talk to their group. There was a dramatic increase in radio interview and podcast requests. My books, which were more than a decade old, started to see a resurgence in sales. There was increased interest in my social media accounts.

What created this new interest? I believe it happened because the path I enunciated does not drag individuals toward the mistakes of either colorblindness or antiracism. It confirmed to me that there is an audience of individuals who see the failures of both colorblindness and antiracism. They demand something new. Something they believe can work.

This attention has excited me and confirmed to me that the path I described some years ago is the one we need to take. With the additional experience I have gained since my last work on racial issues, I am ready to dive into this subject again.

I will argue that what I call mutual accountability is the best way to produce a better outcome in our ongoing racial conflict. Before 2020, I could make the excuse that nobody was paying attention. But given the renewed attention I described above, I can no longer make that claim. It is one thing to stay on the sidelines when there is little chance your activism will do any good. It is another matter altogether when you have an opportunity to make a difference. I want to make a difference.

### **THE PROBLEM IS IN ME**

I am going to offer a solution to the racial problems before us. But no matter how good my approach, I must also recognize that I am part of the problem. I live in a racialized society, and I cannot escape the effect of that society. I, the African American race scholar, have a problem with racism.

This reality slapped me in the face when I was in graduate school. During my last year in Austin, Texas, I lived in an interracial neighborhood in the northeastern part of the city. One day while watching the news I heard of a police shooting. The broadcast included the name of the street where the shooting took place, and I realized that it was in my own neighborhood. A man had been harassing a woman and the police drove him off. When the man returned, he produced what they thought was a gun and the police opened fire, killing the man. Was my first thought about the welfare of the man shot? Was it about the woman who may have watched the man die? Was it even about my own security living in a neighborhood where a crime like that could take place? No. My first thought was, "I hope he was not black."

*I hope he was not black!* Of all the first thoughts to have, why did I focus on race? Because I knew that if this man was black, I would wonder if his race led to his being shot, I would be reminded about the precarious relationships between black men and the police, and I would fear possible new tensions rising in my city and neighborhood. Not only does the skinhead or black nationalist have a problem with racial ethnocentrism, but I do as well. My society has instilled that ethnocentrism within me, and I learned those lessons well. I contribute to the racial alienation plaguing our society and unless I take deliberate steps to do otherwise, I will always be more a part of the problem than the solution.

A major issue inhibiting us from confronting larger institutional and structural racial issues is our own racialized desires, insecurities, and fears. We all occupy a place in this racial structure and we either defend our current position or work to improve that position. What I was not thinking of, and what we tend to not think about, is what is best for everyone. How can I break out of my racialized bubble to put forth answers that reflect more than the reality that I am a black man? How can any of us truly free ourselves from the racialized glue sticking us to our own self-defenses and desires for “our people” to be free to care for all in our society? Recognizing our own weaknesses and biases is a vital first step in dealing with the racial conundrum facing us.

## **OUR UNHEALTHY CYCLE**

As many have said, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. But we do

not have to be insane. We can consider why we have our current racial situation and choose a different route. Have you noticed our unhealthy cycle of racial controversy in the United States? It goes like this: We have a racial incident, such as a police shooting of an African American, and then we have a series of protests demanding justice. After a while there are counterprotests and pushback from those who consider the demands of the protesters to be unreasonable. Finally we return to some kind of normalcy and wait for the next racial incident to start the cycle all over again.

This cycle is the direct result of the fact that we have two contradictory forces fighting for ascendancy in our debate on how to deal with racial alienation. After a racial incident, those promoting some version of antiracism become active. For the moment they have the upper hand in the news cycle with their protests and other forms of activism. But over time those supporting a more colorblind approach push back. They argue that antiracists have overplayed their concerns or that this incident is not a real example of racism. The argument shifts, allowing them the opportunity to push their agenda forward. With both groups going at each other, we then return to our stalemate between the forces of colorblindness and antiracism.

Generally speaking, strong adherents in either group do not alter their perspective due to the new racial incident. Instead they become more entrenched in the rightness of their cause. But soon the attention of the public is drawn to a different event or situation and the momentum to deal

with our racialized society begins to evaporate. Neither those advocating colorblindness nor those supporting anti-racism have been reduced in numbers or social power, so they remain ready to fight on a new day. Any political or social victories won by either side of this racialized debate are short-lived due to the reality that another powerful social group stands ready to resist those victories. The fight, and the cycle, go on.

As long as we are convinced that these are our only two options, this process will continue for the foreseeable future. One possible outcome is that eventually either colorblindness or antiracism will win out and that side will implement long-term social and political reforms according to their own desires. That is a possibility, and I am certain both groups would like to see it occur for their own cause. But it is not likely to happen soon, and in the meantime more social damage will be done in our racial wars. Furthermore, do we think the vanquished group will just go away? Or will they stick around and do all they can to ruin the reforms promoted by the victors?

We can pick a side to fight for and wait to see which group will win, or we can acknowledge that these racial wars are not good for our society and figure out how to work together. We badly need to find solutions that are not short-term but sustainable in a racialized society, since multiple groups have “skin” in the game. This is the only way for us, in any reasonable time frame, to reduce or even eliminate our sick cycle of racial event, protest, counterprotest, normalcy, and new racial event that continues to plague us.

### **MODELS FOR CONFRONTING RACIAL ISSUES**

When I discussed racial issues in my original book (2006) I talked about four different models by which we try to deal with racial issues. Those models were colorblindness, Anglo-conformity, multiculturalism, and white responsibility. Much of what I described in the white responsibility model can now be considered antiracism. Many of the tenets of multiculturalism have recently been co-opted by advocates of antiracism as well. But they focus less on honoring all cultures, which is theoretically the goal of multiculturalism, and rather demand adherence to the values and ideals found in antiracism. This leads not to a spirit of multiculturalism but an assertion that we need the right culture to eliminate racism.

Much of what I ascribed to Anglo-conformity is less popular today. Anglo-conformity focused on teaching people of color to move toward economic success with an emphasis on an acceptance of Western European values and methods. But just as multicultural efforts have largely been replaced with antiracism, so too have Anglo-conformity efforts been replaced with a greater emphasis on colorblindness. While it has not completely disappeared, I do not see the push for solutions based in Anglo-conformity that was prevalent a couple of decades ago. Thus it makes more sense to talk about colorblindness as the dominant ideology rather than Anglo-conformity.

In summary, when it comes to dealing with racial problems, it is clear that today we are looking at two competing dominant ideologies rather than four. These two ideologies have the social and cultural resources to be available to the larger population. But there is a better way.

## MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In previous works I have also spoken of mutual obligation or mutual responsibility when it comes to issues of race. Today I prefer the phrase *mutual accountability*. But if this is not clear, the main element of this model can be described with another two-word concept: collaborative conversations. A collaborative conversation has been defined (Brake, 2019) as “a purposeful, outcome-driven conversation aimed at building on each other’s ideas.” The key to this process is that everyone is allowed to participate, and everyone’s ideas are taken seriously. Everyone has a say in the final outcome. A willingness to participate in the conversation and to make room for the contributions of others is expected. We are all accountable to find solutions that best serve everybody, thus the term *mutual accountability*. For the balance of the book I will use *mutual accountability* and *collaborative conversations* interchangeably.

Mutual accountability is not an insistence that we find equal and identical roles for everyone in our society. It is about our mutual responsibility to enter into the conversation. The outcome will be worked out in that conversation. To use an analogy, if a husband is going out with his male friends too much, he and his wife have a responsibility to discuss a solution they can live with. It is not for her to dictate how much and how often he can go out with them. She may not want him to go out at all, but he has a need for their companionship. It is not up to the husband to decide either. He must take his wife’s needs into account. Rather, they both enter a collaborative conversation to find the best solution for their relationship.

Notice what has not happened. The wife has not been asked to cut down on time spent on her relationships with her female friends, because that was not the problem at hand. If the husband has not been troubled by her time with friends, then it is merely vindictive to insist that she curtail those relationships. The husband and wife have a mutual responsibility to enter into a healthy conversation, but the solution does not require that both parties play an equal role.

In the larger racial context, it is possible that the outcome of our collaborative conversations will involve minimizing the different racial dynamics of each group with the solution grounded in a colorblind mentality. Since it is important not to preordain solutions, I concede that a race-neutral solution is possible. But I seriously doubt this will happen. Given the racial ugliness in our country and the way people of color have suffered, it is unlikely they will settle for a solution that ignores the effects of historical racism and institutional bias. I think the most likely outcome is one where the roles of the races are different, although we share in the responsibility to enter into the dialogue in a respectful manner.

The path of mutual accountability is capable of leading us out of our current cycle because its focus is not purely on winning the argument. This is not to say we ignore our own concerns. Rather, we find a venue where we can air our concerns and have them heard. In return we listen to the concerns of others. In that atmosphere of collaborative communication, we work together to find solutions we can accept. We break the cycle because we learn we cannot have everything. We cannot expect to gain domination over our

political or racial opponents. But we find ways of working together. When we do that, the cycle of protest and counter-protest can be replaced by a process of communication, mutual solutions, and then labor from all sides to make the solutions successful.

Why would those steeped in our previous models of color-blindness and antiracism consider communication and compromise when they are so convinced they are in the right? Some individuals will be resistant. But they need to consider that their chances of getting everything they want are slim. Their political victories will continue to be sabotaged by their opponents. What if they could get most of what they want with their political opponents helping instead of hindering them? If we bring people into discussion and find compromises, then we gain real allies instead of inspiring opposition. The mutual accountability approach is our best effort to find stable, sustainable solutions that pull us together rather than tear us apart.

## **TALKING TO EACH OTHER**

Since communication is important in this approach, it is essential to define certain terms. I do so with the goal of having the terms be accessible to everyone. The way we communicate can either shut people out of the conversation or bring them into the conversation. Research indicates that when individuals are approached in ways that feel threatening, they stop considering arguments from the source of the threat (Chapman, 2012; May, 2007; McNamee, 2011). It does no good to complain about their unwillingness to have those

conversations. As human beings we have certain psychological defenses that kick into action when we hear threatening arguments. The way we talk to each other matters. It does not matter if we're right if we cannot communicate our perspective to those who disagree.

For example, I have often heard whites talk about how they "do not see color." I have talked to enough whites to understand the sentiment behind such assertions. The person is letting me know he or she will not treat me in a negative way because of my race. Because I understand this, I am not offended. However, I know how tone-deaf this statement comes across to many people of color. To say our race does not matter flies in the face of our life experience. Being black is an important part of who I am. To say you do not see that is to say you do not see an important aspect of my identity. Worse, if you ask me to ignore my race, you are asking me to ignore a part of myself. You are saying I cannot bring my entire self into relationship with you.

Now, I believe many people of color understand that race has not been an important aspect of most white people's lives, so white people struggle to see the importance of race. And not recognizing the impact of race on oneself is different from a blanket assertion that race does not, or should not, matter. It leaves open the possibility of learning about how one's racial identity impacts nonwhites. I know that many whites who seem like they are dismissing the role of race in society actually have good intentions and do not intend to dismiss me. But some people of color feel threatened by this idea and are unable to listen further to what these individuals have to say.

People of color can also frame important ideas in ways that make those ideas inaccessible to people outside their ideological circles. This often centers around the way a term such as *racism* is used. You probably will not see that word in this book as much as you might expect. It is not because I am unaware of its permutations or how to apply it in an academically useful manner. Rather, *racism* is a term that, used the wrong way, can shut down productive conversations. Many people connect the word *racism* to white hoods and skinheads and therefore check out of the conversation when it comes up. To that end, I will forego talking about a “racist” or “white supremacist” society. My experience is that those who do not already accept the concept of the United States being a racist or white supremacist society will unlikely be moved by further claims that it is such a society. They are likely to feel they are being blamed for all of society’s problems and close their minds to further discussion.

I prefer to talk about the United States as a “racialized” society. Our racial identity impacts our standing in this society. It is not the only thing that matters. It is often not even the most important thing that matters. But who can argue that race does not matter at all? There is much research showing that it matters quite negatively for people of color. In chapter three we will look at some of that research. But for now, I will refer to the United States as a “racialized” rather than “racist” society. This lets me discuss the negative impact of racialization in a way that allows more people to hear my concerns.