

## Editorial

# “All Lives Matter” (Dis)misses the Point

“Black Lives Matter” began as a hashtag in 2013 and exploded into a global social movement, one which abhorrent recent events have returned to the headlines. Leading this social movement is one particular organization of the same name, Black Lives Matter (BLM) (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/>), which by now is a member-led global network of more than 40 chapters in the U.S., U.K., and Canada. By its very title, this organization focuses primarily on racial justice and equality, but also promotes other secondary principles and forms of social inclusion (<https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe/>). Some people, most notably conservative Christians, support their racial objectives, but oppose their broader objectives.

Among the critiques of and objections to the BLM organization are the Marxist and feminist orientations of its original, radical, female, Black organizers — Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. By these orientations, the organization is no doubt vigorously inclusive: “We affirm the lives of Black, queer, and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum.” Most abominably to some Christian moral sensitivities, they seek to “dismantle cisgender privilege and uplift Black trans folk, especially Black trans women,” and “foster a queer-affirming network . . . with the intention of freeing ourselves from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking.”

Some Christians also object to BLM’s statement on the family: “We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and ‘villages’ that collectively care for one another, especially our children, to the degree that mothers, parents, and children are comfortable.” Notably, they seek “disruption,” not destruction or dismantling, and it is of “the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure” in particular, which is a historically unique product of modernity, not Christianity. Their statement is actually very descriptive of the “extended families and ‘villages’” that were the norm throughout pre-modernity, and may in fact be healthier and morally preferable to the isolated nuclear family of modernity.

What Christians and non-Christians alike reproach is the violence that “black lives matter” protests have sometimes triggered, a problem common to many social movements. It is not unusual for radical organizations to embarrass and hinder the very social movement of which they are a part, often by the willingness of such militant organizations to resort to violence. The labor movement, the women’s movement, and the environmental movement of the last hundred years are other ready examples, with their strikers, feminazis, and eco-terrorists. As representatives of the disenfranchised, disempowered, and dis-privileged, they

feel forced to engage in extreme behavior, because if they remain calm and merely reasonable, they will simply be ignored by enfranchised, empowered, and privileged elites. But why some “black lives matter” street protests have turned violent when the peaceful marches of the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s did not begs further analysis.

It is probable that when the average person on the street with general public awareness hears the phrase “black lives matter,” they think only of the current social movement toward racial equality. It is doubtful that they are cognizant of the secondary objectives of the Black Lives Matter Foundation, Inc. For example, players and fans of professional sport leagues that have taken up the cause of racial justice are likely oblivious to the fine print of the BLM organization. As such, they are responding only to the issue of racism, not consciously promoting other forms of social inclusion. Likewise, if and when detractors resist or reframe the issue, they have only race in mind, not Marxism, sexuality, family, or other concerns. The finer points of the BLM organization are not the main point of the social movement. Racial (in)equality is.

The predominant form of resisting or reframing “black lives matter” that emerged shortly after the social movement gained national attention has been the counter assertion that “all lives matter.” For example, more recently on Juneteenth (June 19) this year, the commemoration of the end of slavery in America, white evangelical U.S. Vice-President Mike Pence, when requested directly three times by three Black pastors, refused each time to speak the words “black lives matter,” maintaining instead that “all lives matter.” To give him the benefit of the doubt, perhaps he was objecting to the finer points of the BLM organization, though that is certainly not the way it came across to the general public unaware of those points. Or perhaps he was suffering from what Robin DiAngelo (2018) termed “white fragility,” the defensive moves that white people make when challenged racially, characterized by emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and by behaviors such as argumentation and silence.

However, at face value, the “all lives matter” rebuttal is a brazen faux cry foul in that it implies all lives are equally at risk, when they demonstrably are not. Hence its offence. It ignores, or worse, denies the disrespected and disadvantaged life experience of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color), and silences their voices. It keeps white supremacy intact, white privilege invisible, and systemic racism in place. While “all lives matter” is held true in principle, it is not true in practice. It remains true only in philosophical abstraction, not in everyday life, which is more evidence that what people think matters less than how they live.

Part of the problem is the concision of slogans which characteristically attempt to say as much as possible as powerfully as possible in as few words as possible, relying on their context to render the intended interpretation. Clearly, the implication here is not that only black lives matter, nor that black lives matter more, but rather that black lives matter too. That should be obvious in our cultural context, in which all lives have yet to matter equally. To miss, or worse, dismiss that reality by generalizing to “all lives matter” does indeed suggest something more

sinister at work, and the need for a slogan that is all about its focus, not its exclusion. To focus on something that matters is not to say that nothing else does. In *Time* editor Jeffrey Kulger's (2016) analogy, "If I say 'Save the whales,' it does not mean 'Screw the eagles.'"

This, said Judith Butler (2015) of the University of California, Berkeley, "is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered. . . It is true that all lives matter, but to make that universal formulation concrete, to make that into a living formulation, one that truly extends to all people, we have to foreground those lives that are not mattering now." Or as the placard of one protester explained, "Yes, all lives matter, but we're focused on the black ones right now, ok? Because it is very apparent that our judicial system doesn't know that. To us, if you can't see why we're exclaiming that black lives matter, you're part of the problem."

If your life-long intimate partner came to you in obvious emotional pain and asked "Do you love me?" to reply "I love everyone" could well be true, but it would also be cruel, and excruciating. That is why "Baby on Board" window signs on vehicles are not countered by "Adult on Board" decals. Cancer Awareness events are not contested by All Diseases Matter symposia. Fire trucks arriving at a house ablaze are not confronted by neighbors insisting that all houses matter. The "Boston Strong!" response to the bombing of its 2013 Marathon was not challenged by "All Cities Strong!" The "Black is Beautiful" movement of the 1960s was not collapsed into "All People are Beautiful." So something else, something deeper, must be driving "all lives matter" to "correct" "black lives matter."

Thus the debate about which slogan is implicitly racist. Those claiming color-blindness as their virtue—the white privilege of being able to ignore race—insist that "only racists see race," thereby accusing BLM of being inherently racist. However, color-blindness in a societal context in which color does empirically make a drastic difference, in which some lives do matter more than others, is far more logically and likely to be racist, either unintentionally, or worse, intentionally. As Carla Shedd of Columbia University put it, the intent of "all lives matter" may be a "shared humanity," but its essence is actually the opposite, because it "erases the vulnerability and dehumanization of black people" (May 2016).

More globally, historically, and theologically, Morgan Guyton (2020) traces "all lives matter" back to a theology of generic humanity in which racial difference is viewed as an illusion. Paradoxically, it functions as the foundation of white supremacy, because it first coalesced around white European Enlightenment elites espousing an acultural rationalism composed of reason, science, capitalism, and Christianity. Their moral duty, what the British Nobel Prize winning writer Rudyard Kipling (1899) famously termed "the white man's burden," was then to "civilize" the non-white world. What ensued was "one of the most tragic chapters of human history: the age of colonialism in which many indigenous cultures were irretrievably erased as their people were either wiped out entirely or assimilated into the generic humanity of the global capitalist market," with its white Jesus. This massive, overwhelming challenge now

confronting the “black lives matter” social movement cannot be overstated as it pleads for an actual generic humanity, an actual practice of all lives mattering equally, by focusing on those who do not yet.

As in all forms of social inequality in which the privileged patronize the dis-privileged, such as patriarchy, the insight of Indigenous Australian activist Lilla Watson is profoundly instructive, and hopeful: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

## References

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