



**The Academy**  
for Judaic, Christian, and Islamic Studies

**A STATEMENT  
ON RACIAL JUSTICE**

[www.afjcis.org](http://www.afjcis.org)

580 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024  
academy@afjcis.org | (424)208-0888

## Introduction

We are in unprecedented times that have led us, as a country, to face the national crisis of racism. While systemic racism has existed since the inception of this country, the events of the past months have made it imperative that all who are against racism—all who are anti-racist—join together and stand up to racism once and for all. Against the backdrop of the devastating global pandemic of the coronavirus, our country learned of, and many witnessed on film, the tragic murder of George Floyd, and we learned of the tragic murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless other people of color. Over the past year, there have been protests across the nation, and policies are changing to root out the evil that is racism at a governmental level and at organizations and institutions throughout the country. The Academy for Judaic, Christian, and Islamic Studies stands strongly in support of the fight against systemic racism, as we feel called to do by God and by the values and the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We unequivocally affirm that Black lives matter.

## The Jewish Perspective

One of the most foundational verses found in the Torah, The Five Books of Moses, that speaks to the essential question of what it means to be a human being, is found in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Torah. In Genesis chapter 1, verses 26 and 27, we learn that God made the first human in the image of God: *betzelem Elohim*. If we are to understand that we are all descendants of the first human, then it follows that all people are created in the image of God. It then follows that every single human being is worthy of love. Furthermore, in Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18, there is the following commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.”<sup>1</sup> Contrastingly, racism operates best when there is a social agreement that some human beings are superior to others and that the “superior” human beings have every right to hatefully oppress the “inferior” human beings. This immediately breaks down when we look at and take on these two Jewish values. If we are all created in the image of God, and if we are to love all human beings as we love ourselves, then there is no room for racism in Judaism. Sadly, over the course of history, the Jewish people have missed the mark in a full commitment to these values, either through misinterpreting other areas of our sacred texts that people mistakenly believe could validate such an evil as racism, or through standing idly by when people were treated as anything other than being created in the image of God and with hatred rather than with love. Our sacred texts, properly understood, charge us

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<sup>1</sup> We have decided to use the common translation of “your neighbor” to translate the word ‘רֵעֵךְ’ after numerous discussions and research on the word, as we hope to convey a non-gendered and universal understanding for the translation of the word ‘רֵעֵךְ’. By using the word “neighbor” in our translation, what we mean here is someone who you come into contact with, but that is not necessarily like you in terms of race, religion, gender, sexuality, class, etc. Our hope is that this notion can extend to all of humanity.

not only to avoid racism on our own part, but also to actively take a stand against racism in society and fight for racial justice and racial equity. Jewish values and our sacred texts demand that we be anti-racist, and that we act accordingly.

### The Christian Perspective

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs his followers how to pray. The “Lord’s Prayer,” as this teaching came to be known, is incorporated into nearly every Christian worship service today. It begins: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Through this recitation, Christians reaffirm a commitment to the pursuit of a more equitable, just world, fully shaped by God’s abiding love. In our contemporary moment of racial reckoning, Christians again find guidance in scripture. The Gospel of Luke records the famous “Parable of the Good Samaritan,” in which Jesus selects a member of a detested ethnic minority to play the starring role as the rescuer of a man with gruesome injuries, facing death (Luke 10:25-37). By depicting an outsider Samaritan as the righteous example for the crowd to follow, Jesus challenges the racial prejudices of his time and asserts that all people are capable suppliers and deserving recipients of compassion and grace. Following the end of the parable, Jesus commands: “Go and do likewise.” That is, we are to be *good neighbors* for all other people, taking action when we observe injustice and pain. When Black Americans are disproportionately targeted, incarcerated, and—indeed—murdered by law enforcement, Christians have a clear directive to disrupt the systems of structural racism that perpetuate this injustice. Like the Samaritan, Christians are called to intervene.

The Epistle to the Galatians reiterates and amplifies this command. In this message, Paul urges the early Christian community to heed Jesus’s teachings of radical inclusion. Paul writes: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28, NRSV). This letter was a condemnation of the social inequities of its time, and it demonstrates how demands for racial justice are not a contemporary fabrication or twist of the faith. Indeed, racial justice is a central, non-negotiable tenet of Christian ethics. (Please see the brief essay titled “How the Emperor Constantine Led Christianity Off the Rails and Into Violent Sin,” a reflection on the dangers of state-sponsored religion.)

### The Muslim Perspective

The Islamic tradition contains guidance pertaining to justice, diversity, pluralism, and equality that is relevant to our modern challenges. Justice is a major recurring theme in the Qur’an and establishing justice is a direct command from God in the Qur’an; this is based on the verse, “You who believe, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your close relatives. Whether the person is rich or poor, God can best take care of

both. Refrain from following your own desire, so that you can act justly- if you distort or neglect justice, God is fully aware of what you do.” (Qur’an 4:135). While the Qur’an demands justice, it also highlights the inherent equality and dignity of human beings. This is established by the verses, “And We bestowed dignity on the children of Adam” (Qur’an 17:70) and “People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God’s eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.” (Qur’an 49:13). Therefore, all humans are endowed with dignity and no one race is superior to another. Some scholars have pointed out that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) serves as one of the first examples of being anti-racist when he said, "All humanity is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor does a non-Arab have any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor does a black have any superiority over a white except by piety and good action." While we see messages of pluralism and anti-racism in the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, did not abolish slavery outright. However, Islam did restrict slavery, grant specific rights to slaves, and place major incentives to free slaves which ultimately could lay the groundwork for a total emancipation of human beings in a Muslim society. In our modern world, it is important to remember the goal of emancipation and to recalibrate our focus to the Qur’anic injunctions of standing for justice and defending the dignity of all humanity. Finally, some Muslim scholars have emphasized that racism cannot be legislated away because racism is connected to the sin of pride and arrogance due to its attachment to a sense of racial supremacy. All people regardless of their sins have the potential for redemption. Perhaps then communities of faith can serve as the vehicles for redeeming those drowning in the sin of racism.

### Action Plan for the Academy:

The clear message of our sacred scriptures for our time and place calls us to contribute to a just, multi-racial, pluralist society where the dignity of every person is honored, everyone’s contribution is equally valued, and diversity is celebrated as God’s gift. We therefore commit ourselves to work for racial justice, reconciliation, and the dismantling of systemic racism in our society by

- standing with our African-American sisters and brothers in affirming unequivocally that Black lives matter;
- opening our minds and our hearts to hear, see, and acknowledge the pain of the victims of racism in our society;
- increasing the racial diversity of the leadership of the Academy;
- acknowledging the truth that some people have interpreted and applied their religion to justify the oppression of Black people in this country;

- disavowing any religious justification of racism as incompatible with the teachings of our sacred scriptures;
- disseminating the liberating message of our three religious traditions through
  - conducting research based on honest scholarship
  - educational forums for colleges, universities, religious congregations, and the community at large
  - interpersonal encounters between people of different religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds

These commitments we make, trusting in God who loves justice and mercy.

adopted November 17, 2020