

Conversation with Ibram X Kendi *How to be an Antiracist*

Transcript of October 22nd Zoom Conversation sponsored by the Anti-Racism Committee of the Episcopal Diocese of New York

Transcript of questions posed to Ibram X Kendi along with his response and his ending comments that were part of the Anti-Racism Committee's Episcopal New York Reads 1 Book. The questions were generated from individuals participating in the numerous book discussions held across the Episcopal Diocese of New York. Listed below are the interviewers:

Ms. Carla Burns Chairperson of the Anti-Racism Committee, Member of the Diocesan Reparation Committee and Union of Black Episcopalians (CB)

Rev. Deacon Paul Anthony Daniels ordained to the transitional diaconate on 6 June 2020 in the Diocese of North Carolina joined the Congregation of St. Saviour at the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine as a part-time clergy assistant. (PD)

Ms. Ginny Loughlin a leader of Rivertown Episcopal Parishes for Anti-Racism, Inclusion and Reconciliation (REPAIR) (GL)

Questions asked in **Bold** followed by the interviewers initial and responses by Dr. Ibram X Kendi responses in *italics*

- 1. This past summer, the world really started paying attention to you and your work in a way as never before. Can you tell us a little bit about how it feels? What that attention feels like. What some of those responses have been to your book? (PD)**

Oh I mean its certainty when you write a book and you write a book with intention because you really want people to reflect on their world you really want people to reflect on themselves. Obviously, I think, to see and to know that many people are using my book and other books to recognize the pervasiveness and viciousness of racism. And even recognize perhaps some of the ways in which they've been contributing or upholding racism, and even recognize how they could be antiracist. Of course it's been exciting to sort of see. And certainly, it's been thrilling and energizing. At the same time of course the more attention that comes to anyone the more and I think this was the case with other folks whose work was being looked at a

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new of course there was a tremendous amount of people seeking to discredit a tremendous amount of hate. And so it's been fascinating 'cause there's been a tremendous amount of hate and love. And, of course, been trying to focus on the love not hate and even the constructive criticism and which certainly is going to help my work become even sharper.

- 2. I think this question about focusing on the love rather than the hate as a means of keeping oneself sustained throughout the process of engaging others. I want to ask a little bit about ... You talked about your parent's faith and you talked about their patience in the church. Can you tell us do you have some kind of spiritual practice some kind of faith community or some kind of community of people that you lean on for the purpose of being replenished or being sustained or being renewed throughout your own experiences with anti-racism with anti-blackness? How do you keep yourself? your soul and your body and your mind sustained? (PD)**

So I mean I keep sort of myself sustained. So I think my earliest moments as I shared in "how to Be Antiracist" with a church or religious or a Christian community, was seeing my parents not necessarily involved in a ministry inside the church but more so involved in a ministry outside of the church to really sort of liberate people. And so for me, I think in many ways my sort of work really seeking to allow for people to recognize this beautiful human community as equal, to bring sort of good to the world. My sort of conception of Jesus as a revolutionary and all of us seeking to follow in that path. And seeing really all the people who are engaged in that type of revolutionary work. What really sustains me is people I know and people I don't know. And people who truly are serious about relieving people and relieving human suffering. I mean these are the people, these are the communities these are the organizations that sustain me and sustains my soul.

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- 3. I think another part of the book that was interesting for a lot of folks was the sense in which sort of anti-blackness for you and I think for many scholars, it's not just a matter of white domination but it is an internalized disposition that even people of color have or work through or live through. Can you just talk a little more about how you think internalized anti-blackness shifts how people understand the relationship between racism and power? And if it is the case that someone who is Black, who is a person of color can be anti-black, can be racist how does that change how we conceive the function of racism within our political and social context? (PD)**

Yeah one of the things I did not say very directly in the book that I should have said, was I think it is critically important for us to not use terms racism, racist interchangeably. And so as I did define in the text, racism is inherently systemic while racist with a T is individual. And so I think when I look at America's history and even when I look at this current moment what I see is the majority of Black folks actually engaging in antiracism which is also systemic. I see the majority of Black folk or I see Black America, generally supporting anti-racist policies that lead to racial equity and justice and are substantiated by ideas of racial equality. But it is a different question when we talk about the individual. So can the individual of color can the Black individual be racist? It is a different question than whether Black people as a collective group, or even LatinX people as a collective group and because power operates differently at a systemic level as it does at an individual level. And to the individual has the power to resist, has the power to resist racist power, has the power to resist racist policies, has the power to not resist because that individual believes that the problem is not systemic racism policies but its Black people. And one of the things you asked about internalized racist ideas is, let's say you are Black and you have internalized the lie that Black people are dangerous and violent then when you look out at Black people being Mass Incarcerated, or mass murdered by the police you're not going to see that as a problem if anything you are

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going to blame Black people for that incarceration and murder. And you certainly are not going to challenge the system of racism. So what I was ultimately arguing for persons of any color the question that we all as individuals need to ask whether you are white, whether you are Black, whether you are Asian Latinx or Native is are you upholding by your ideas, by your actions by the policies you're supporting and not supporting the system of racism or not? Or are you challenging it? Because if you are upholding it, you are being racist. And if you are challenging it you are being antiracist.

- 4. In 1978 Supreme Court, Justice, Harry Blackmun wrote In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way. And in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently.” Would you advise institutions like the Episcopal Church to follow this path? And do you see this as a way to our becoming an anti-racist institution? (GL)**

So yes and so what that means for instance to give an example. In 1866 after African Americans were freed as a result of the Thirteenth Amendment to imagine that those African Americans have equal rights and resources as their former slave masters and so therefore they don't need anything they don't need 40 acres and a mule. It is just preposterous. Or to imagine that someone as a result of history is 40 yards behind as a result of racist history. And then suddenly we're going to eliminate that racist history that person who's 40 yards behind doesn't need anything. It is just preposterous. And so, ultimately I think the question is And I think the church needs to be asking itself I think institutions need to be asking themselves, what can we do to eliminate disparities? What can we eliminate to create racial justice? What can we do to make sure people of color are well represented? What can we do to make sure that we're a force of good in our community?

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- 5. Some Episcopalians could understand the work of anti-racism as correcting a problem of power as you suggest in the book rather than a problem of immorality and ignorance and they embrace the term anti-racist. Others shun the anti-racist term and embrace the ideas of truth and reconciliation and spreading the love of Jesus as a means of dismantling racism. Are these schools of thoughts contradictory? (GL)**

Well it really depends because one of the things that I think is important for folks to realize, so historically we have been taught this idea that the cradle of racist ideas, what cause people to, let's say denigrate or think lowly of let's say, Black people is because that person or those people hate Black people. And so the hate within them causes them to then express these viciously racist ideas. Then we have been taught because these people have these racist ideas, that 's why they support or institute racist policies that exclude or segregate let's say Black people. And so based on that consideration, it makes sense that okay you know what? If all of these people are filled with this hate, and that's the sort of source of all of this racism that it makes sense to issue a campaign of love. If the source is ignorance, then it makes sense to push a sort of campaign of truth. And believers, Christians believers in particular have really focused on truth and love because American commonly, whether they are Christian or non-Christian believe again, that the source of this racism problem is hate and ignorance. But the history actually does not verify that source. History and even the current moment tell us that the source of racism is self-interests. And so actually we find historically and currently is powerful interest, powerful self-interests behind racist policies. And then those powerful self-interests then produce racist ideas to justify those policies. And then unsuspecting Americans consume those racist ideas and actually become ignorant and hateful. And in our time as an example you have powerful political self-interests that are behind voter suppression policies, because they realize they can't win elections without them. And they mass produce the idea that there's massive voter fraud. And then people believe that idea. I'm saying this all to say that for that person, or those persons or these powerful interests for us to issue a campaign of love and hate as I should say of love and truth that's not going to affect them it not going to move them. It didn't move slave holders. It didn't move Jim Crow segregationists. It's not

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going to move people who are engaged in voter suppression today and police violence. But what can move them is a movement for power. Because fundamentally it's a power struggle. But what the believer can say is you know what? What is guiding me to engage in this power struggle is love is truth. And so I think it's a different sort of orientation.

6. Turning to parish life What would you say to a priest who says, "My congregation is not ready to have a conversation about race."? (GL)

Well I would say that first and foremost I suspect most people who right now are happy that they had a conversation about race which then thrust them upon the path to be anti-racist, which then thrust them on the path to indeed be a better Christian are happy. That someone had the courage to encourage them to engage in a conversation that they weren't ready for. And indeed, as you know the things that we need to do for ourselves the times in which we've been most happy with ourselves was when we engaged in something or did something that we were not ready for. And we are typically encouraged to do that by other people who love us and who love us dearly.

7. Dr Kendi, You speak a bit about intersectionality in your book. And when it comes to race as in reference in your book you speak about it mainly in reference to white folks and Black folks which is understandable. But I am wondering if you see some kind of efficacy perhaps in extending the function of intersectionality the method of intersectionality to other racialized people. And if so, do you think that allowing intersectionality to be functional with reference to racialization broadly, somehow dilutes the issue of anti-blackness in particular? (PD)

So when I think of a sort of intersectionality as it relate to being anti-racist I am thinking about it broadly. And so I am thinking to be anti-racist, one

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must recognize the disparities not just between Black women and white men. They must recognize the disparities between native women and Asian men. They must recognize the disparities between Latinx women and white men, between the Black poor and the white poor. On the other hand I think that until we have to be antiracist we should not be looking up or down at any racialized intersectional group. We should not be blaming the people on the lower end of any racial disparity. We should be seeing the cause of disparities as power and policies. But on the other hand when we look at the history of racist ideas, particularly in the Western world, really the history of racist ideas in general, what I find through my own work, through my own research is that anti-native ideas were built on anti-Black ideas. What I find is that in many cases, anti-Asian racist ideas were built on anti-black racist ideas. I mean many people are familiar of course with the model minority conception that became popular or it was popularized in 1966. In which of course Asian Americans particularly, Japanese Americans were considered a model minority. And what people forget is an example that they were contrasted with the problem minority. And that was Black people. And so I think that what I've found historically is having a baseline conception of anti-blackness, whether at an ideological level or a policy level, allows people to better understand other forms of racism in the United State. But I wouldn't necessarily then say, so therefore anti-black racism is more important because all these forms of racism are extremely important and need to be eradicated.

- 8. Yelp has just introduced a tool to help users avoid businesses accused of racism. When a big business gains public attention and have reports of racist conduct such as racist language or symbols, Yelp is going to place an alert indicating the business has been accused of racist behavior on their page and along with that will be a link to an news article where more can be learned about the incident. What do you think of this and**

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what impact do you think it might have? (GL)

I meant I think it could certainly be helpful. I mean just like when we go into the grocery store and we are considering a new food product and because of government regulations, or because we can look at the back of that product and see what's actually in it. I mean, many American are actually concerned about the racial politics of the companies, of the institutions that they are using. And so I think this gives them the ability to know and see and decide who they're going to do business with as a result.

9. So if we were to elect a new administration, obviously the election being right upon us what policies do you feel we should tackle first? (GL)

Wow I mean it hard for me to fathom what should go first. I mean I think that if we are specifically talking about eliminating and creating racial justice and creating a racially just society I think the four policies that I would consider would be Medicare for All to eliminate the massive racial disparities in insurance rates and under insurance rate. As part of a larger policy to create high quality health care for all. And secondly, would be to begin a reparation study. We have a growing racial wealth gap in this county. The only policy proposal that has been put forth that have the capacity to reverse let alone eliminate the growing racial wealth gap is reparations. And as someone committed to racial economic equality I'm supportive of reparations. And thirdly I would say we need to completely reimagine public safety in this country. And I think we need to begin to recognize that instead of criminalizing people, we should start criminalizing our continuous refusal to eliminate poverty.

As a follow on to that as individuals how do you think we can further those initiatives even put pressure on those initiatives? Do you see ways

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to do that? (GL)

So I just I mean I suspect that there are local organizations who are fighting racial justice organizations that are fighting for the complete reimaging of public safety fighting for a radically different health care system, that are fighting for a complete reimaging of our economic system. And so as individuals, we can support those organizations by lending our expertise, by providing a platform for them, by donating to them and even if we have the time by joining those organizations.

10. Give us an update on the work of your antiracist research institute (GL)

Wow, So we have been doing a lot! And I think with everything that been going on with me privately I've spent most of my time building our center for anti-racism research at BU. And just to give you a quick sense of we're building a center that's really built on the pillars of research, policy, narrative and advocacy and we feel we can really harness the research expertise of scholars to not only analyze and collect and track racial disparity data, but even figure out the policies behind those disparities to innovating research based policy correctives to using that research to really shift the narrative about the fact the problem is bad policies and not bad people. And work very closely with advocacy groups to institute effective anti-racist policy

11. You spent a good deal of your time as a New Yorker And I am a veteran of teaching in New York City. And we both know that the New York City Public School system has been deemed the most segregated school system in the United States by UCLA a few years ago. And it is riddled we know with elitist and racist policy. Do you have any specific anti-racist suggestions for parents of public school students? Can we actually create an environment whereby changing a racist policy becomes in

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Power's self-interest? In other words can we convince these powerful people that are within their interest to do something about this? (CB)

I'm not sure But if that's not possible if it not possible to convince the policy makers to create a much better educational system, then parents need to organize among themselves and enforce that change. And I think it is important to really know what the problems are And whether the problems are sort of resource gaps whether in terms of how schools are funded, whether the problems are in the schools that are overwhelmingly Black and LatinX, that the teachers tend to be less experienced than in the other schools, whether the problem is that teachers in some of those schools imagine that a black boy walking into the classroom is automatically a behavioral problem or even a pre-school aged Black girl is a behavioral problem. And there are no protective barriers or whether the problem is having police officers in the schools. I mean I think we have to really figure out what are the problems, what policies need to be instituted to eradicate these problems. And organize to get that done.

12. Did you think there is a way I now this over my career there is a way to convince white parents of white children that a white school is not the best thing for them? People equate a good school to basically a white school. And a school that is not good to a school with children of color in it. Is there any way we can I mean people don't seem to understand that the world is changing and that white children are going to have to get along with everybody. The dynamics the racial composition of New York City schools have changed dramatically and there are white students in the minority do you get what I am driving at or do you don't quite understand. (CB)

Well I mean, I certainly think that it's critically important for white parents of white children who truly do want their children to excel by the time they

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grow up professionally. I think it's important for those white parents to realize that the chances are they are going to have to interact with non-white people, people of color, Black and LatinX and Asian and Native people. And so if they don't necessarily have the culture literacy if they don't have the sort of racial fluency to really understand how it is to be anti-racist then they could struggle in certain ways. Especially if we've transformed this country as we certainly hope to do within the next 10 years.

13. I guess we could say something similar with the next question that we have which is many New York of New York City's apartments are co-ops which are created with racist policies. Do you have any specific suggestions for a current home-owner? (CB)

I mean, again, I can't necessarily say something specific 'cause I am not necessarily an expert on housing in New York City. But any disparities we can find in housing there's policies behind them which we need to eliminate,

14. Do you think it's possible that New York City is becoming a white city gentrification and that we might end up looking like Johannesburg with white people living in Johannesburg pre I'm talking about the pre-freedom in South Africa? But basically the city was a white place and the people who couldn't afford to live there and the people of colored live outside and commuted into the city each day. Is that a possibility for us? (CB)

It's happening in New York City It's actually happening around the country in which working class Black and brown people are being pushed into the sort of suburbs. That pretty much how it looks in many part of Europe in which Black, in which people of color live in these suburban, sort of enclaves. And so yeah, I mean gentrification is creating a similar dynamic here.

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15. What do you say to the persons who says rather dismissively says well he's a socialist. Referring to you (CB)

Well, I'd ask them, what does *it mean to be a socialist?*

You would ask them what they mean. What do you think? How would you define a socialist? (CB)

Let me just say well the reason why I would ask them what they mean is because often times, people use terms particularly in a dismissive way And they define it in a way that actually doesn't fit the term. Or they define it in a disparaging way that the person actually doesn't wouldn't even see themselves in. And so I think for many Americans they view a socialist as somehow someone who wants to take away all their freedoms. Just as they view public health official right now. As who is mandating mask wearing as someone who's trying to take away their freedom. And what that is saying to me is they have the perspective that they as an individual should have the freedom to infect the community they want their own individual freedom to infect the community just as you had individuals who wanted the freedom to enslave my ancestors. You had people who wanted to have the freedom to lynch my ancestors. And they didn't want any community restrictions on their exploitation and lynching and enslaving. Then you have other people who say, no, you know what? The community wants to be free of those individuals who are trying to infect us. Meaning we want freedom from infection. The community wants freedom from slavery, from exploitation, from oppression, from sexism, from racism. And then I mean, and then what the individual recognizes that they are a member of that community. So to advocate for community freedom is to advocate for your own freedom

16. You refer to the reason for constructing racism I mean for having racism and constructing the system of race as being in self-interest. Basically this has been constructed because people are engaged in self-interest But is there a part that excessive materialism our societies need for wealth

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greed for wealth and power? How does excessive materialism fit into that? I mean self-interest can mean survival. And self-interest can mean the slave society that was created where people were living extravagantly and on the backs of enslaved Africans. So do you understand what I am trying to get at there? (CB)

Yeah so when I say that self-interest was really the driver for racism what I am saying first and foremost its critically important for us to distinguish between the people who are mass producing racist ideas and people who are consuming them. And so typically the people who are producing them are producing them to defend policies and typically, powerful people have instituted racist policies because it benefited them in some way. Now one of the ways in which powerful people have so powerful people have thereby benefited from racism and even of course, capitalism. And have of course particularly for those who are super wealthy or even many people who are in middle class or upper income they have become accustomed to a particular lifestyle. And then they are constantly told that if we transform this society then they are somehow going to lose that lifestyle. And so then there's this desire to hold on to that lifestyle and hold on to their material possessions. And they're constantly told that what they should value the most is indeed those material possessions just as you have politicians right now saying you know what? We should be over coronavirus. Do you know what? It doesn't really matter how many people are dying. You know what? Because we need to get back to making money and acquiring money and that's what matter most. So people are looking to their political leaders or are looking to people they respect and hearing that, that materials and things are more valuable than beings and human life. And people are constantly taught that generation after generation. But people are born thinking that And so we can create a different type of world where people and life in truth is at the center of our existence

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17.Regarding the conjoined twins of racism and capitalism. What are the changes we need to make to our economic system in order to create resource equity between racial groups? (GL)

Well first, I mean reparations would be a start; secondly we could have an economic system in which our policies are meant to protect not the super-rich, not the corporations but indeed regular ordinary people and small businesses. So everything now like when you look at our economic system it is geared to benefit the powerful and well off as opposed to, and that why you have powerful massive corporations who are trying to convince everyday people that it's better to have smaller government. Because they know that is just them, huge corporations versus people versus those people they'll win every time. But if you have government that has these size and scales and strength and policy apparatus that it can actually protect people from any big bad apparatus then it will be better for the actual people. And so but ultimately I think I'd like to really just narrow there with reparations and creating policies, governmental policies, economic policies where everyday people are protected and valued and advantaged as opposed to the super rich and corporations.

18.How would you compare the writing that came out during the Civils Rights Movement –Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Angela Davis with the writing you are seeing now including your own? (GL)

I think where I would sort of compare is I know many of the writers of my generation were just incredibly inspired by those writers of the sort of post-World War II certainly Civil Rights and Black Power era. And if anything many of us grew up reading those were the first books we treasured. In many ways we learned how to think and write from some of these writers. And even but obviously we had to transform and advance and write for our own time because obviously the conditions are different. At the same time

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they are strikingly the same.

Your comment about treasured writers made me recall your story of you as the seven year old in the classroom with the treasury you were reading at time (GL)

19. Does reparations look different in faith institutions versus secular public institutions? (GL)

So I mean I think that if we were to truly have a real sort of accounting of our past it wouldn't just be the ways in which the US government supported and defended and benefitted from profited from slavery and even Jim Crow and even Mass Incarceration today. We would also look at other institutions obviously the private sector, religious institutions, colleges and universities. We would look at other places whose wealth and power has been built on the backs of enslaved people.

Do you have a sense of what form reparations would take? What that would look like? (GL)

So I am agnostic, I am a student, I m a scholar and so for me if I had a choice the impact of reparations would be such that it would eliminate the growing racial wealth gap. How that can be done I am not an economist And so it is not necessarily something I can speak to but I can speak to the end goal which is elimination the growing racial wealth gap because most people know that wealth is a function of the past and the present wealth is inherited so it is the best predictor of the effect historically and currently of racism. the totalizing effect of racism on Black America

20. Speaking about reparations you know our diocese has a reparations committee that has existed for quite some time. And at our last diocesan

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convention our Bishop Dietsche announced that he set aside \$1.1 million to somehow start building a fund for reparations. And I sit on that committee and we are in the process of looking for what would be the best way to start spending that money. We're trying to build it because we know \$1.1 million is not nearly a sufficient amount but what would you think as a church as a faith institution what do you think would be something that might be good for us to start thinking about spending money on in terms of reparation. Or also even some other measures that are not monetary? (CB)

Yeah so I mean I would obviously defer to local activist and local Black folks. But what I would one think I would potentially suggest would be towards efforts at anti-racist policy change. That can release and improve the lives of Black people across the city.

Ibram X Kendi's closing remarks:

I am thankful so much for so many people taking time to read my book. And indeed as a native New Yorker as die hard New York Knicks fan despite what's happen over the last two decades. And as somebody who was born and raised into the church in New York and also as someone who argues that the heartbeat of being anti-racist is confession, is the ability to self-reflect and confess the times in which we are being racist, which I know for folks who realize the importance of confessing one's sins in order to receive salvation, in order to transform, in order to be closer to Jesus or God. I can see how people would have a sort of a better sense of the role of confession and how by contrast the heartbeat of being racist is denial is continuing to sin and sin and sin and denying that you're a sinner. I don't wanna start preaching a sermon...

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