

Obedience to Authority and the White Moderate in the Age of Black Lives Matter

Chinwendu Nwokeabia, Notre Dame of Maryland University
cnwokeabia1@live.ndm.edu

The white moderate's simultaneous understanding of the problem of anti-Blackness in the United States and voicing a want for a calmer, more orderly, and peaceful means of solving this problem rather than direct action is not only a means of maintaining privilege but is also a subtle form of willful obedience to authority.

Definitions

- Authority: the power or right to give orders and to enforce obedience¹
- Obedience: a deeply ingrained behavior tendency² to submit to one's authority³
- The white moderate: a group of white individuals that are focused on maintaining order instead of on justice⁴
- Direct action: any form of action that produces the tension needed to address present injustice. Includes protest and civil disobedience

The white moderate provides responses to social justice issues in a less urgent, less direct manner

- 1960s: "A Call for Unity", aka "Statement by Alabama Clergymen"
 - Statement issued by eight local Alabama clergymen questioning the timing and methods of the Birmingham Campaign (suggested following an electoral process rather than direct action)
- 2010s: "All Lives Matter"
 - A phrase started as a response to Black Lives Matter, used to emphasize that all lives are important, and also diminishes the efforts and importance of the Black Lives Matter campaign
- 2010s: Various commentary related to the evolution of society beyond race
 - Examples: "We live in a post racial society;" "I don't see color;" commentary on racial colorblindness

Though these responses show some sort of understanding that action is needed to address social and racial injustices, the fact that there is little urgency in the white moderate's response can be seen as obedience to authority and a means of maintaining white privilege

- Obedience to authority/maintenance of white privilege
 - 1962: Milgram experiment
 - Conclusions of Milgram's shock experiment: majority of participants (64%) reached maximum voltage; individuals were more likely to follow authority against their values when they were not directly responsible for the damage done, and that individuals derive satisfaction from pleasing authority figures.
 - In a similar vein, white moderate may be pushed enough to voice view on social issues, but out of fear of displeasing white authority, they fail to move toward direct action.
- Maintenance of privilege
 - With the suggestion of more tame means of addressing social justice, the status quo (where whites maintain their privilege) is more likely to be maintained
 - Establishment of willful ignorance (such as colorblindness) stems from a fear of loss of privilege

¹ "authority, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/13349. Accessed 4 November 2019.

² Milgram, Stanley. "The Perils of Disobedience." *Arguing about Political Philosophy*. Ed. Matt Zwolinski. New York: Routledge, 2009. 119-128. Print.

³ "obedience, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/129545. Accessed 4 November 2019.

⁴ King, Martin L., Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail." *Arguing about Political Philosophy*. Ed. Matt Zwolinski. New York: Routledge, 2009. 129-137. Print.